

U.S. POLICY ON TUNISIA

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST,
SOUTH ASIA, CENTRAL ASIA,
AND COUNTERTERRORISM**

OF THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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U.S. POLICY ON TUNISIA

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 2023

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:03 p.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Christopher Murphy presiding.

Present: Senators Murphy [presiding], Kaine, and Young.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator MURPHY. Good afternoon. We are going to call this meeting of the Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism to order.

We will open with short opening statements and turn it over to our witnesses. I look forward to our discussion with the subcommittee.

We convene this subcommittee today to discuss American policy towards Tunisia. You might ask why is a Senate subcommittee that has jurisdiction over nearly a third of the world holding a hearing on a country that is just a little bit bigger than Indiana.

The answer is pretty simple. Tunisia is a country that for a long time showed what was possible in the Middle East and North Africa. It was a country that had seemingly gotten it right and was able to stay on a democratic path while transitions faltered in Egypt and Libya and Yemen.

Tunisia drafted a new constitution, held multiple free and fair elections. After a really high-profile series of terrorist attacks, Tunisian security forces, with the support of the United States, increased their capacity to protect the country, but also balance protecting civil liberties. Civil society groups, independent media proliferated, exercising their newfound rights to hold Tunisia's leaders accountable, but amidst all of this progress, institutional reforms and accountability initiatives, they really stalled and economic conditions worsened. Widespread corruption persisted. Public services got worse. There was police brutality left and right and the political elites were just squabbling.

It ended up being a pretty terrible advertisement for democracy. Tunisian people saw what democracy looked like and they did not love it. It was in this context that President Kais Saied promised

Tunisians that he was going to fix this mess that many Tunisians had grown really tired of.

When I first met President Saied in Tunisia in August of 2021, he told me and our delegation that his intent was not to get rid of democracy, but that he was just going to fix the problem of Tunisia having adopted the wrong kind of democracy, the wrong model, and he was just going to bring a model that worked.

I am going to be honest, in that same meeting I saw all the trappings of a despot in waiting. President Saied was self-adulating, saying that he was the only one pure enough to lead. Everybody else was tainted and corrupt.

He was conspiratorial about dark enemies he saw around every corner. He bristled at public criticism, telling me no less than three times that his seizure of power was not a coup.

I left that meeting pretty convinced that Tunisia was likely headed in the wrong direction and, unfortunately, over the last 21 months my worst fears have borne to be true.

Since that meeting, President Saied has followed a dictator's handbook almost to the letter, disbanding parliament, writing a new constitution that consolidates his power, disbanding judicial independence, and employing military tribunals, arresting members of the opposition including just recently this week treason charges for the leader of the primary opposition.

These are not the actions of a leader who intends to restore democracy just under a different model. Over the last 21 months that President Saied has been steadily dismantling Tunisian democracy, the U.S. policy unfortunately has been hesitant.

I would argue that it has been halfhearted and often naïve. By failing to draw our lines in the sand Saied has felt confident in taking one step after another to consolidate power and ignore polite requests from American diplomats to change course.

We are talking about Tunisia and only Tunisia today because, I would argue, that this is a place for the United States to correct course. When it comes to our tendency to talk a tough game on human rights and democracy, but then not really lead by example, we cut deals with dictators.

We sell billions of dollars of weapons to dangerous autocrats. We send regular signals that there are few consequences for your political and economic relationship with the United States if you move from democracy to repression.

I argue that this is a hearing in which through the prism of Tunisia policy we can also talk about how we cannot afford this duality—talk tough, but act often too weakly on human rights and democracy.

We are going to ask these questions today how we can adjust our assistance policies so that we are supporting the Tunisian people and their ability to speak freely and to hold their leaders accountable.

We are going to ask how we can empower our diplomats to do that work inside Tunisia. Lastly, I hope that we are also going to talk about China because anytime that I argue that we should be reforming our partnerships with dictators in the region, whether it be Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, or Tunisia, the counter that I often

hear is that if we do not extend that hand, no matter how repressive the regime is, China is going to fill the void.

I think we have to realize that not everything is a zero-sum game in our competition with China and that we do not have to make deeper commitments to authoritarians just because China is making a competing offer.

I think the best way to compete with China is not to try to beat China in a race to the human rights bottom. If China can only do deep economic deals with countries in which the IMF deems to be unbankable that is a pretty bad long-term prospect for Chinese economic diplomacy.

I would argue that Tunisia is a critical test case to change tack and to back up our words with actions and so I am looking forward to this discussion with our very able guests today.

With that, I will turn to the ranking member.

**STATEMENT OF HON. TODD YOUNG,
U.S. SENATOR FROM INDIANA**

Senator YOUNG. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to help shed a light on the erosion of democratic institutions in Tunisia and the rise once again of authoritarian regimes in that country.

I greatly appreciate your participation, Ms. Doherty. I know we have had an opportunity to work together when you were with Mercy Corps. Thank you for serving our country in this capacity.

Mr. Harris, thank you for your career service of the State Department and our country.

As the Biden administration is proud to point out its defense of democracy in places such as Ukraine, I cannot help but observe its noticeable silence in other key areas such as the Biden administration failing to mention the resistance in Myanmar to the military junta during its recent Summit for Democracy and failing to respond to the authoritarians in Tunisia, which is what we are here to discuss today.

Following the Tunisian revolution in 2011 when the people rose up against corruption and the lack of freedoms in their country they inspired actions that sought to bring democracy to Tunisia and inspired the Arab Spring which swept across the Arab world.

However, since 2019 President Saied has increasingly tightened his grip on power. In recent weeks he has dismantled institutional checks and balances, developed a new constitution, and taken Tunisia back in an authoritarian direction.

Today, I hope we hear from our witnesses what actions, not just words that we are going to see from the Administration to meaningfully counter Tunisia's current trajectory.

While I am sure our witnesses will point to the reductions for Tunisia in the President's budget request to Congress, I do not think we should be naïve enough to think that minor budgetary reductions will be sufficient to get the attention of President Saied.

Of course, this conversation is complicated by Tunisia's support for our counterterrorism activities in North Africa, which, in my view, is precisely why we must get the government back into a place of better behavior.

The urgency of reversing this erosion of democratic institutions could not be more relevant to our own national security. As with other topics and geographies that we have discussed in this subcommittee, China is again present in Tunisia.

Beijing, of course, does not reinforce any of these messages about democratic backsliding or protecting institutions. The authoritarians in Tunis are happy to welcome Huawei into their system and are also partnering on various R&D partnerships with Beijing.

All of this points to a deeply uncertain future for the Tunisian people. President Saied may attempt to blame others, but the people of Tunisia must know that their troubles are a direct result of the failures of their own government.

While the Tunisian people have risen up before I pray that they will not have to rise up again. If we are able to work together with our likeminded partners I am confident that we can help bring the government back into a better behavior.

Again, I am pleased that we are here to discuss such an important issue and I look forward to the conversation, Mr. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Senator Young.

Let me now introduce our witnesses.

First, it is my pleasure to welcome Mr. Joshua Harris, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for North Africa in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. Previously served as director for North African Affairs at the NSC as well as holding other positions in the State Department in Libya, Tunisia, Iraq, Slovenia, and Croatia.

Also joining us today is Ms. Megan Doherty. Senator Young mentioned her service at Mercy Corps and NDI, but she also has held positions at the National Security Council and the State Department, working in the Middle East and North Africa. She is here in her capacity as Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for the Middle East at USAID.

I will hand the floor over to both of you for your opening comments and then we will engage in a discussion. Thank you very much.

STATEMENT OF JOSHUA HARRIS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTH AFRICA, BUREAU OF NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. HARRIS. Thank you, Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, Senator Kaine. Thank you very much for the opportunity to share the Department of State's assessment of the situation in Tunisia.

While a fundamental commitment to the Tunisian people in line with U.S. values and interests endures in unbreakable friendship, Secretary Blinken has spoken very clearly to the reversal of many of the Tunisian people's hard-won democratic gains over the past 21 months.

The actions of the Tunisian Government have impacted every aspect of our relationship. The Department of State continues to adapt to the dramatically altered landscape in Tunisia since July 25, 2021 and working very closely with allies and partners to marshal all diplomatic tools including recalibrated foreign assistance to advance our objectives.

In this unsettled environment the United States has significant interests that guide our diplomacy: forestalling an economic collapse that would further destabilize the situation in Tunisia and regionally, including for our NATO allies; promoting democratic and constitutional governance that is able to safeguard the rule of law to promote respect for human rights and secure the fundamental freedoms Tunisians cherish; challenging the pernicious attempts of our adversaries to exploit the country's upheaval; and sustaining critical cooperation with the Tunisian military provided it remains apolitical and professional in order to pressure terrorist networks and maintain support for U.S. and allied activities.

Most immediately, Tunisia is confronting a spiraling economic emergency. The Tunisian Government in response last year developed a rigorous reform program which enabled Tunisia to conclude an IMF staff level agreement in October of 2022 on a \$1.9 billion support package.

As President Saied has indicated publicly, he has decided not to move forward with crucial reforms even as international partners have stepped forward with more than \$1 billion to bolster Tunisia's reform efforts.

A Tunisia that unravels economically cannot be an environment in which democratic governance can flourish nor one in which other vital U.S. interests can be effectively advanced.

For this reason, Secretary Blinken, Assistant Secretary Leaf, Ambassador Hood, among others, have emphasized to Tunisian counterparts that the United States will support Tunisia in implementing its reform program negotiated with the IMF if it chooses to do so.

Whether and how Tunisia opts to proceed is a sovereign choice that only President Saied can make. An IMF program cannot be imposed.

Concurrent with this economic crisis Tunisia is experiencing profound political changes. A consolidation of executive power has now been formalized through a referendum marked by low voter turnout. The judiciary has faced significant pressures amid the arrests and prosecutions of perceived government critics, business leaders, political activists, and journalists.

Taken together, the past 21 months in Tunisia have, as Secretary Blinken has said, borne witness to an alarming erosion of democratic norms. The Department has and will continue to condemn politically motivated arrests both in our private diplomatic engagements and publicly.

The arrest by the Tunisian Government of opponents and critics are a troubling escalation fundamentally at odds with a Tunisian constitution that explicitly guarantees the freedom of opinion, thought, and expression.

Within hours of the emergency declaration, Secretary Blinken engaged President Saied directly to share our alarm about the consolidation of executive power. Over the past 21 months U.S. officials at all levels have reinforced that our relationship is strongest when there is a shared respect for democratic principles, for human rights, and for fundamental freedoms and the Department continues to consult broadly with international voices in support of a democratic and prosperous future for all Tunisians.

The Department is continuously reviewing all aspects of U.S. diplomacy including our foreign assistance programs to ensure alignment with U.S. policy goals.

Since July of 2021 and amid our deep concerns about democratic governance the State Department has recalibrated U.S. programs to reflect the changed landscape and to ensure consistency with our interests and values.

The President, in fiscal year 2024, has therefore reduced the top line budget request for Tunisia by 65 percent. The President's budget request reinforces an unambiguous message that there can be no business as usual amid this crisis.

The recalibration has sought to ensure what economic and development assistance continues is directly benefiting the Tunisian people, including crucial investments in civil society.

U.S. assistance represents targeted life-improving investments for Tunisians in need, which reflects that economic and political empowerment are fundamentally linked.

The Department's relationship with Tunisians who serve their country in uniform is targeted to U.S. interests. A guiding principle remains engaging on the vital national interests of protecting U.S. diplomatic personnel and facilities, the welfare of American citizens in Tunisia, and neutralizing the continuing threat of terrorism while promoting respect for the rule of law.

It remains in the U.S. interest to see a secure and prosperous Tunisia, led in a manner accountable to the people that can deliver economic stability and protect the fundamental freedoms of all.

We will continue to speak frankly with the Tunisian Government about its actions and policies and align our diplomacy with U.S. interests and values in the spirit of long-term friendship between the American and Tunisian people.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the subcommittee today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Harris follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Joshua Harris

Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to share the Department of State's assessment of the situation in Tunisia.

While a fundamental commitment to the Tunisian people in line with U.S. values and interests endures in unbreakable friendship, Secretary Blinken has spoken clearly to the reversal of many of the Tunisian people's hard-won democratic gains over the past 21 months. The actions of the Tunisian Government have impacted every aspect of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship. The Department continues to adapt to the dramatically altered landscape in Tunisia since July 25, 2021, and, working closely with Allies and partners, to marshal all diplomatic tools—including recalibrated foreign assistance—to advance U.S. objectives in this new context.

In this unsettled environment, the United States has significant interests that guide our diplomacy: forestalling an economic collapse that would further destabilize the situation in Tunisia and regionally, including for our NATO Allies; promoting democratic and constitutional governance that is able to safeguard the rule of law, promote respect for human rights, and secure the fundamental freedoms Tunisians cherish; challenging the pernicious attempts by our adversaries to exploit the country's upheaval against both Tunisian and American interests; and sustaining critical cooperation with the Tunisian military, provided it remains apolitical and professional, to pressure terrorist networks and maintain support capabilities for U.S. and Allied activities.

Today, I would like to update the Subcommittee on the Department's diplomatic efforts and programs to advance these priorities.

Most immediately, Tunisia is confronting a spiraling economic emergency. The disruptions in global food and energy markets spurred by Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded structural weaknesses in Tunisia's public finances after decades of deferred reforms. On a human scale, the ensuing crisis has left Tunisian families often unable to find or afford basic consumer goods and medical supplies, a burden faced most acutely by the most vulnerable and economically precarious communities.

The Tunisian Government in response last year developed a technically rigorous reform program to stabilize the economy. If implemented, these reforms would better manage the public wage bill, ensure the viability of state-owned enterprises, and target subsidies to those in greatest need. This Tunisian plan won support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and thus enabled Tunisia to conclude a staff-level agreement in October 2022 on a \$1.9 billion support package. As President Saied has indicated publicly, he has decided not to move forward on crucial reforms, and the program is thus unable to advance for IMF Board approval, even as international partners have generously stepped forward with more than \$1 billion to bolster Tunisia's reform efforts. With this IMF program and associated donor commitments on hold, Tunisian economic officials have made efforts to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis, including through improvements in tax collection and greater domestic borrowing. Such measures, however, cannot substitute for a robust reform program and a sustainable solution.

A Tunisia that unravels economically cannot be an environment in which democratic governance can flourish, nor one in which other vital U.S. interests can be effectively advanced.

For this reason, Secretary Blinken, Assistant Secretary Leaf, and Ambassador Hood, among others, have emphasized to Tunisian counterparts that the United States will support Tunisia in implementing its reform program negotiated with the IMF, if it chooses to do so. We recognize that whether and how Tunisia opts to proceed is a sovereign choice that only President Saied can make; an IMF program cannot be imposed. Regrettably, intensive U.S. diplomatic engagements at all levels have raised significant questions about whether the political support exists in Tunis to enable this reform package and the external financing these reforms would unlock. This is a question of Tunisian, not U.S., policy. If Tunisia decides not to proceed with reforms within the framework of an IMF program, the United States—as a country deeply invested in the Tunisian people—will continue to consult with the country's leaders on what they see as the alternative.

Concurrent with this economic crisis, Tunisia is experiencing profound political changes. The overhaul of the political system began with the July 2021 emergency declaration and suspension of the former parliament. The resulting consolidation of executive power has now been formalized through a referendum marked by low voter participation. A new parliament has been seated, but questions remain about whether meaningful checks and balances can be realized. The judiciary has faced significant pressures amid the arrests and prosecutions of perceived government critics, business leaders, political activists, and journalists. Authorities have brought criminal proceedings against Tunisians for "spreading false news," tried civilians in military courts, and levied terrorism accusations against those who hold different opinions about the country's future.

Taken together, the past 21 months in Tunisia have, as Secretary Blinken said, borne witness to an alarming erosion of democratic norms.

The Department has and will continue to condemn politically motivated arrests, both in our private diplomatic engagements and publicly. The arrests by the Tunisian Government of opponents and critics are fundamentally at odds with the principles Tunisians adopted in a constitution that explicitly guarantees the freedom of opinion, thought, and expression. Such actions, including the arrest of the former Speaker of Parliament, and the Tunisian Government's implication that this arrest was based on public statements, are rightly condemned as a troubling escalation by the Tunisian Government. The concern is larger than any one individual, party, or ideology. As with all governments, the Tunisian Government has an obligation to safeguard human rights, including freedom of expression, which are essential to a vibrant democracy and the strongest possible U.S.-Tunisia relationship.

Particularly disturbing is the targeting of foreigners as scapegoats for the country's economic crisis. Violence and intimidation against the vulnerable shock the conscience, both American and Tunisian.

Within hours of the emergency declaration on July 25, 2021, Secretary Blinken engaged President Saied directly to share our alarm about the consolidation of executive power. Over the past 21 months, U.S. officials at all levels have reinforced that our relationship is strongest when there is a shared respect for democratic principles, for human rights, and for fundamental freedoms. Secretary Blinken has

emphasized directly with President Saïed the importance of inclusive reforms to strengthen democratic checks and balances and the protection of fundamental freedoms. And the Department continues to consult with a broad range of regional and international voices in support of a democratic and prosperous future for all Tunisians. We have not and will not shy away from frank conversations with Tunisian officials to urge that they advance democratic governance, respect the rule of law and independence of the judiciary, end politically motivated arrests and prosecutions, and repudiate the perception that Tunisians may face reprisals for speaking their mind. In doing so, we do not seek to impose U.S. values, but rather to support the ideals endorsed in Tunisia's July 2022 constitution.

Another key objective of U.S. policy toward Tunisia is to stave off our adversaries' predatory exploitation of the simultaneous economic and political crises to gain a foothold in strategic sectors of the Tunisian economy and burrow in strategic infrastructure with no regard for Tunisian sovereignty or the economic well-being of the Tunisian people.

The Department is continuously reviewing all aspects of U.S. diplomacy, including our foreign assistance programs, to ensure that U.S. dollars are aligned with U.S. policy goals. As the Subcommittee knows, the United States invested more than \$2 billion from 2011 to 2021 to support Tunisian-led efforts to make government more accountable and responsive to the people, to fight corruption, to promote inclusive economic growth and development, and to develop an effective security partnership that serves both U.S. and Tunisian interests. Since July 2021 and amid our deep concerns about democratic governance, the State Department in coordination with other departments and agencies has recalibrated U.S. programs to reflect the changed landscape and to ensure consistency with our interests and values.

The President in Fiscal Year 2024 has, therefore, reduced the topline budget request for Tunisia by 65 percent. The President's Fiscal Year 2024 budget request reinforces an unambiguous message to Tunisian leaders and to our international partners that there can be no business-as-usual amid this crisis, and action by the Tunisian Government is needed to restore confidence in the country's democratic trajectory.

The recalibration has sought to ensure what economic and development assistance continues is directly benefitting the Tunisian people, including critical investments in civil society. U.S. assistance represents targeted, life-improving investments able to offer a small measure of relief for Tunisians in need. Programming creates thousands of direly needed private sector jobs in remote areas, drives investments in clean energy, promotes civic engagement, addresses food insecurity, and supports the vital contributions of Tunisian civil society. Continuing these targeted investments is in the U.S. interest, and reflects that economic and political empowerment are fundamentally linked. To abandon all such programs would not only be counter to U.S. interests but risk the perception of collective punishment against the Tunisian people based on the alarming actions taken by the government.

Guided during a time of extraordinary upheaval by our long-standing friendship with the Tunisian people, the Department is continuing to review U.S. assistance programming to ensure it is addressing the needs of economically vulnerable Tunisians and contributing to an inclusive political future. We are continuously refining our approach to advance these goals, and will not hesitate to consider course corrections should they be warranted. While the United States has reduced our bilateral aid to Tunisia, the President has requested resources in Fiscal Year 2024 to establish a Middle East and North Africa Opportunity Fund, which is designed to allow for agile responses to emerging opportunities that further U.S. policy goals or respond to crises and challenges that threaten U.S. interests and security.

The Department's relationship with and support for Tunisians who serve their country in uniform is targeted to U.S. interests and is being continuously reviewed. A guiding principle remains engaging with the Tunisian Government on the vital national interests of protecting U.S. diplomatic personnel and facilities, the welfare of American citizens in Tunisia, and neutralizing the continuing threat of terrorism, while promoting accountability and respect for the rule of law. The professional women and men of the Tunisian Armed Forces remain on the front lines of the fight against terrorism in Tunisia and the Sahel, guarding against instability emanating from Libya and providing airlift and support capabilities for U.S. and Allied activities. In partnership with the United States, Tunisians have made notable progress against terrorist networks; this fight is not yet won. Walking away from a security partnership with Tunisia focused on U.S. interests would carry the risk that terrorist groups could regain strength and again threaten Tunisia and, from Tunisia, our Allies and partners.

The Tunisian Armed Forces have stood by and secured the country's defense amid the upheaval since July 2021—as a professional force should. Together with our

partners in the Department of Defense, the Department believes it is vital that the Tunisian Armed Forces remain apolitical, professional, and resourced to fulfill their defense mandate in support of the Tunisian people and alignment with U.S. interests.

It remains in the U.S. interest to see a secure and prosperous Tunisia, led in a manner accountable to the people that can deliver economic stability and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all.

Tunisia's elected leadership faces a sovereign choice about whether and how to go forward with the government's reform plans and enable a democratic and prosperous future. These are questions of Tunisian policy. We will nonetheless continue to speak frankly with the Tunisian Government about its actions and policies, and align our diplomacy with U.S. interests and values in the spirit of long-term friendship between the American and Tunisian people.

After a decade of bipartisan U.S. support reflecting the Tunisian people's hard-won democratic gains in 2011, the context in which we are now pursuing U.S. interests is markedly different. As such, the relationship between the United States Government and the Tunisian Government has changed in far-reaching ways since July 25, 2021. The goal of seeing the Tunisian people realize their vision for a brighter future, however, has not.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee today on the situation in Tunisia, and I look forward to your questions.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF MEGAN DOHERTY, DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR, BUREAU FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. DOHERTY. Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, Senator Kaine, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the role of the U.S. Agency for International Development and supporting the Tunisian people.

Tunisia's future feels increasingly tenuous. The Tunisian people find their democracy and fundamental freedoms endangered at the same time that their economy is significantly struggling.

Despite the downward trajectory and the disillusionment of many Tunisians with their political leaders since 2011, a recent poll shows that more than 70 percent of Tunisians believe democracy is still the best form of governance and there is still an active and vibrant civil society.

Our strategy is to invest in the Tunisian people and their resilience to both political and economic shocks. In response to the democratic backsliding we pivoted our assistance to work directly with the Tunisian people and we are committed to supporting Tunisians' democratic aspirations while also helping them address the very real economic challenges that they face today.

Right now inflation is at a four-decade high. Food prices and food insecurity are on the rise and more than a third of Tunisians under the age of 35 are unemployed.

As the economy continues to contract, the number of Tunisians attempting to migrate to Europe has surged five-fold since 2019. USAID's investments in the Tunisian private sector are targeted to support the Tunisians that are trying to rescue their economy and we know that these investments work.

Thanks to the generosity of Congress over the last 4 years, our economic growth work has helped more than 44,000 Tunisian small businesses increase their sales by more than \$580 million.

This work has created 48,000 new sustainable jobs, two-thirds of which are held by women. The current economic crisis is of par-

ticular risk to Tunisia's most vulnerable, especially in the marginalized cities outside the capital.

Last year we provided \$60 million to UNICEF to help Tunisian families keep food on the table and keep their kids in school. Just last week we partnered with the World Bank to offset the rising food insecurity caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Beyond the economy, USAID is also working to support Tunisian civil society, to protect the integrity of democratic processes, and to combat mis- and disinformation. The goal here is not just to support Tunisians in their current crisis, but also to invest in the core pillars needed for a healthy sustainable democracy for Tunisia's future.

The dissolution of parliament and municipal councils, decrees limiting freedoms, politically motivated arrests, these have all had a real chilling effect on Tunisian civil society and, yet, they continue to organize bravely in the face of growing threats.

For example, for the December 2022 legislative elections USAID supported 90 percent of the domestic and international observers who monitored and reported not only on electoral issues, but also hate speech and misinformation.

In the July 2022 national referendum, it was USAID-supported partners who caught erroneous voting data from the election commission, publicly called for corrections, and succeeded in getting the commission to publicize all of their counting data.

With presidential and local elections on the horizon, domestic observer groups are already organizing and advocating for a more inclusive, accessible electoral process.

USAID has also been investing in countering the dangerous rise in mis- and disinformation that we have seen across the country. Our partners have trained more than a hundred journalists and reached more than 700,000 Tunisians with countering disinformation campaigns.

They have also launched initiatives to dispel rumors to make sure that Tunisians have timely accurate information. The democratic and economic threats facing Tunisia are significant, but so too is the distance that the country and its people have come in the decade after 2011.

Despite the real risks facing Tunisia's economy and democracy, many Tunisians are leading the hard work to recover the economy and to protect their rights and freedoms. We will continue to stand with them and support them.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the subcommittee on this important issue, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Doherty follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Megan Doherty

Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the role of the U.S. Agency for International Development in supporting the Tunisian people.

Despite slow but laudable democratic progress over the past decade, today Tunisia's future feels increasingly tenuous. Tunisians are finding their democracy increasingly endangered, while the economic situation continues to worsen. Inflation hovers at a four-decade high, including food prices, which have risen over 15 percent since last year, and more than a third of Tunisians under 35 are unemployed.

The increasing number of arrests and criminal investigations targeting journalists, politicians, and others have had a chilling effect on civil society and shows that

democratic backsliding remains a serious concern. As the economy continues to contract, many Tunisians are looking to Europe to find economic opportunities despite mounting horrific stories of migrants perishing at sea.

While these statistics show a concerning trajectory for the country, we know that building a stable and prosperous democracy is a long-term proposition, and Tunisia is now only a little more than a decade into its democratic transition. Despite the deep disillusionment of many Tunisians with their political leaders since 2011, more than 70 percent of Tunisians surveyed still believe democracy remains the best system of governance and some windows of opportunity remain.

Addressing the country's fragile economic state is critical to create space for democratic progress. This is especially true outside of Tunis where the economic plight is even worse and shortages in basic supplies from food to medicine are common. Our approach is to build Tunisian resilience to both economic and political shocks. In response to the democratic backsliding, we pivoted our assistance away from the government to work directly with the Tunisian people.

ECONOMY

Addressing Tunisia's economic crisis is essential in order to create an environment in which democratic progress can occur. The lingering economic and social impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic and price increases caused by Russia's war on Ukraine have exacerbated the challenges of daily life for the Tunisian people. Already, Tunisians face major shortages in basic items ranging from food to medicine. Food prices have risen more than 15 percent since last year, according to the National Institute of Statistics, and inflation and unemployment—already above 10 and 15 percent respectively—continue to rise.

As a prosperous future feels increasingly out of reach for Tunisians, more are attempting dangerous migrations to Europe. The number of Tunisians attempting to migrate to Europe has surged five-fold since 2019.

USAID's investments in the private sector directly support Tunisians who are working to rescue their economy. Small businesses are the primary source of income and opportunity for jobless Tunisians, and their best chance to find hope amid a failing economy and rising costs of living. Over the past 4 years, our economic growth portfolio has helped more than 44,500 Tunisian micro and small businesses increase sales by \$580 million, expand exports by \$430 million, secure \$217 million in new loans and create 48,000 new jobs, of which 67 percent are for women. The confidence USAID partnership inspires also helped these small businesses attract \$132 million in additional investments.

Over the past 4 years, we have also partnered with Tunisian universities, vocational schools, and career centers nationwide to help students build the skills for private sector employment to ensure jobs are not just paychecks, but true careers and opportunities. We helped universities upgrade the business administration and information and communication technology curricula for approximately 6,000 students a year. We paired this work with training, job fairs, internships, and career services to make sure more than 14,500 young Tunisians a year have the skills and opportunities to find meaningful private sector employment.

Amid these opportunities to help move Tunisians forward, we know that Tunisia's current economy places many at greater risk of being left behind. Last year we provided \$60 million to UNICEF to keep food on the table and kids in school in Tunisia's most vulnerable households, and just this past week, we partnered with the World Bank to help offset the food security impacts caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We know that these activities alone will not turn the tide of the economic crisis, but they will lessen the suffering of the most vulnerable during a time of extraordinary economic turmoil.

DEMOCRACY

USAID is working in partnership with the Tunisian people to build an even more resilient civil society, to promote the integrity of elections and other democratic processes, and to combat mis- and disinformation in all forms of media. Given Tunisians' long tradition of civil society activism, investments in these efforts will not only support Tunisians in the face of current challenges, but also help as they work to build the core pillars needed for a healthy, sustainable democracy in Tunisia's future.

Resilient Civil Society

Tunisians have seen the dissolution of municipal councils and parliament, a slew of decrees limiting freedoms, and politically motivated arrests. Despite increasing fears, Tunisian civil society is still bravely organizing in the face of growing threats.

For example, following the leaked amendments of Decree 88 that would outlaw foreign funding for civil society groups, Tunisian civil society organizations unified to reject these restrictions. And just this month, parliament’s decision to restrict broadcasting of parliamentary sessions to only national television met such vocal opposition from the journalist syndicates that parliament reversed its decision and opened access to all accredited media outlets.

To continue building on more than a decade supporting Tunisian-led public engagement, we will launch a new effort to ensure the long-term viability and impact of civil society this year. Through this initiative, we will provide training to help CSOs build plans for long-term financial stability, improve their internal governance, and increase their public reach and impact.

Protect Election Integrity

Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of functioning democracies, and the Tunisian partners we support are acting to protect these processes. For the December 2022 legislative elections, USAID funded 90 percent of the domestic and international observers, who monitored and reported not only on electoral violations of international best practices, but also hate speech and misinformation.

In the July 2022 national referendum, USAID-supported partners caught erroneous voting data reporting from the Tunisian Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), publicly called for corrections, and persuaded the commission to publicize all of their counting reports, allowing both Tunisians and international observers to see corrected data for themselves. With presidential and local elections on the horizon for 2023–2024, a USAID-supported network of domestic elections observer groups is advocating for reforms of the electoral framework through outreach to other civil society organizations, the media, and Tunisian citizens.

Countering Mis- and Disinformation

In addition to these efforts, USAID integrates information integrity into our democracy work. We are investing broadly in countering the growing threat of mis- and disinformation. From rumors about COVID vaccines to disinformation about rapidly unfolding political events, misinformation is free flowing in Tunisia, especially on social media platforms.

Since 2020, USAID has trained more than 100 journalists and supported media fact checking efforts to dispel rumors and help provide Tunisians with reliable sources of information. We have seen strong returns from these investments, including Tunisian-led initiatives to confront false information, address hate speech, and stop rumors. This year, a local media partner launched “Tunisia Investigating,” a new broadcast program to counter false claims and rumors, including during the recent wave of attacks against sub-Saharan migrants.

While training for media professionals is important, reaching the general public is equally vital. Last year, our online educational campaigns to counter disinformation reached more than 700,000 Tunisians. We will continue to support our partners as they combat mis- and disinformation and work to ensure Tunisians are getting the information they need.

Building Strong Social Ties

Finally, our democracy and governance efforts empower and include marginalized groups, youth, and women. Real disparities exist across Tunisia. The coastal regions account for 90 percent of employment and 80 percent of the country’s urban areas. Young Tunisians between the ages of 15–29 make up nearly one-third of the country’s population, but the unemployment rate for those under 35 is 37 percent. And young people in the interior account for a disproportionate amount of that number as their unemployment rates are more than three times higher than those in the coastal areas.

Supporting these young people to develop their skills, learn about public policy, and take action locally helps them tackle the issues that are front and center to Tunisian families. USAID has seen our young Tunisian partners drive COVID–19 vaccination efforts, run for local office, renovate community spaces, and advocate for improved local services. More than 80 percent of young Tunisians who participated in USAID youth programs now volunteer for community organizations or participate in advocacy campaigns on issues ranging from water scarcity and sanitation to political inclusion of marginalized groups.

USAID’s support for training for young and historically underrepresented Tunisians activates them as engaged members of their communities and country and empowers them to raise their voices and vision long past when USAID’s support for specific activities ends.

SUSTAINING COMMITMENT TO TUNISIANS

I have been honored to visit Tunisia and meet with youth activists, entrepreneurs, and community organizers. Despite the real risks facing Tunisia's economy and democracy, many Tunisians are leading hard work to grow the economy and protect fundamental freedoms. However, the risk of disillusionment with the promises of democracy increases as Tunisians see growing distance between their desire for a brighter future and their economic plight today. Protecting Tunisia's democratic future requires investments in the Tunisian people who are working to build not only the pillars of democratic governance, but forging a pathway towards a viable economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee on this important issue. I look forward to your questions.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much to both of you for your testimony.

Mr. Harris, a couple of times in your testimony you refer to the military as being apolitical or having an apolitical reputation. It is no worry that all of the diminution in aid in this budget comes from nonmilitary assistance and so the question is whether that is still an accurate assessment of the Tunisian military.

Remember, it was the military that shut the doors of parliament upon President Saied's order. This is not apples to apples, but it is roughly the equivalent of the U.S. military assisting the January 6 protesters in their assault on the Capitol.

I mean, they were front and center in the shutdown of democracy and since then they have regularly appeared at President Saied's side as he issues the decrees that consolidate his power.

How do we come to the conclusion that we are sending a message, as you said in your testimony that it is not business as usual when we continue full funding or flat funding of the security assistance while at the same time the security forces seem to be participating in this crackdown on democracy and political speech?

Mr. HARRIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The first thing I would say is that the consolidation of executive power and the overall political trajectory you described is an assessment that we share. It is one that we have engaged directly with the Tunisian Government on, that Secretary Blinken has engaged with President Saied directly on at all levels.

With regard to our specific assistance figures as reflected in the President's 2024 budget request, we have requested reductions across the board within Tunisia, including with respect to our security assistance.

Our request is approximately halved, which in our judgment reflects an unambiguous message that there simply cannot be a business as usual so long as the concurrent economic and political crises that are playing out in Tunisia continue and, moreover, that tangible steps in Tunis to restore confidence in the country's democratic trajectory are needed to enable the strongest possible bilateral relationship including with the Tunisian military.

At the same point, the activities that we are undertaking with the professional women and men of the Tunisian armed forces are focused very specifically on vital U.S. interests.

These are programs that address the safety of U.S. diplomatic personnel and facilities, that address the wellbeing of American citizens in Tunisia, that seek to sustain pressure on terrorist groups that threaten Tunisia and through Tunisia our allies and

partners, and that also seek to promote a culture of respect for the rule of law and accountability within the security forces.

The concerns about attempted politicization are ones that we fully share and we are continuing to address that very directly both at a political level and directly with the Tunisian armed forces to ensure that they remain professional and fulfill their constitutional mandate.

Senator MURPHY. Let me just clarify. Your current budget request for 2024 does not request flat funding for military security aid, or do I have that wrong? You do not—you are not asking for a reduction in military funding to Tunisia?

Mr. HARRIS. Since the events of July 25, 2021 we have adjusted every aspect of our assistance request, including with respect to security assistance.

Senator MURPHY. Correct. Last year's budget passed by Congress reduced assistance to Tunisia, but this year's request from the Administration foresees continued funding at 2023 levels for the military, but on the other hand requests reductions in funding for civil society and human rights.

I mean, this is the part that I do not understand and this is my question to you, Ms. Doherty. You gave a pretty sunny description of the state of U.S. support for Tunisian civil society, but I am looking at a budget that is contemplating a reduction of funding for civil society and for human rights and a maintenance of funding for the very institutions that are standing side-by-side with Saied in his campaign of repression. How does that send a signal to the Tunisian people that we are with them?

Be fair with us because I understand the complexities of this. We cannot pick our partners all the time. Much of this money has to run through institutions that the president may control and so share with us if there are practical limitations to our ability to get money to the right players to support civil society or whether this is actually a strategic decision by the Administration to reduce funding to civil society while maintaining funding for security.

Ms. DOHERTY. Thank you. While I am very, very proud of the investments that we have made and the work that our Tunisian partners are doing on the ground right now in this moment of economic and democratic crisis, in no means do I mean to understate the challenges that are facing our partners right now.

It is not a rosy picture, and as it relates to our relationship with Tunisian civil society we are not walking away. We have been working with them since 2011 and I would say despite the very real challenges they face, they are one of the bright spots in this moment.

While the FY24 budget does reflect a proportional decrease, we are actually about to launch a new \$25 million program of support to Tunisian civil society that is going to work with organizations across the country, including in some of the more historically underrepresented and marginalized regions, and at the same time, we are also coordinating with other donors who also have significant interests in Tunisia and share our approach to make sure that we are identifying and filling gaps and that we are deconflicting and coordinating assistance across the board to make sure that Tunisian civil society gets the support that it needs.

Senator YOUNG. Thank you.

Ms. Doherty, you just mentioned coordination with other donors and that sort of helps me zoom out as a reminder to anyone who may be attentive to these proceedings.

We have partners throughout Africa, throughout the North Africa sort of region, that can help us influence the Government of Tunisia and I think to the extent we can leverage those relationships that will advance our own objectives of ensuring not just stability in the region, but trying to bring the leadership of Tunisia in a position of better behavior.

I ask both witnesses to what extent is the United States engaging some of our partners in Europe and in Africa to come up with a multilateral and coordinated strategy in our approach to Tunisia?

Mr. HARRIS. Senator, coordination with our allies and partners is a central aspect of our diplomacy. That is especially the case on a very difficult problem set as is playing out in Tunisia right now.

Even today I was in coordination with a number of European partners about specific issues in Tunisia. The Secretary has been in touch with his counterparts across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

What we have heard in those conversations is a shared concern about the instability, both economically and politically, that is playing out in the country right now. That instability risks not being confined to Tunisia itself.

For a number of our friends and partners, they see the potential for this, too, to destabilize more broadly, to spill out across Tunisia's borders, and for that reason that has animated a very serious international effort to bring a multitude of voices to bear on this problem.

There are different degrees of influence, different relationships, that different actors across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa have with the Tunisian Government, with others with influence.

A core priority for our diplomacy has been to seek to align those conversations and to bring a broad range of voices to bear on a very challenging situation.

Senator YOUNG. As we seek alignment, are there key areas—either Mr. Harris or Ms. Doherty—of divergence where we are attempting to achieve more alignment, more harmonization, and have greater effect on the behavior of the current Tunisian regime?

Ms. DOHERTY. On the assistance side we have seen tremendous alignment, actually. I would argue that this crisis has helped us strengthen our coordination. There is a very strong coordinated donor community, particularly around democratic processes, elections, civil society support.

We have an active working group both in Tunis and also constant communication between capitals. I am actually getting on a plane on Monday to go to Brussels and meet with my EU counterparts and we will be raising this issue with them as well.

Senator YOUNG. Thank you.

Tunisia signed an MOU with China in 2018 to be included in the Belt and Road Initiative. There has been a debt crisis looming and we have recently seen China reducing its investments in Africa, particularly where investments have underperformed or been threatened by some measure of instability.

We have also seen China signal that it is disinclined to help Tunisia should it fail to secure a loan from the IMF.

Mr. HARRIS, can you describe the risk of Tunisia moving further into China's orbit, as you see it? Do the circumstances of this suggest that perhaps the U.S. can use some of its leverage to influence Tunisia for the better without risking the country turning to Beijing?

Mr. HARRIS. Senator, what we are witnessing in Tunisia is the very pernicious attempts of our adversaries, including the PRC, to seek to exploit the simultaneous crises that are playing out in Tunisia.

We see that in terms of an attempt to get a foothold in strategic sectors of the Tunisian economy, to burrow in in strategic infrastructure, with no regard for Tunisian sovereignty or the wellbeing of the Tunisian people.

These are issues that we would welcome the chance to discuss with the subcommittee in a different setting in greater detail.

A fundamental goal and principle of our approach is to address the urgent instability economically and politically that is creating these vulnerabilities and for that reason seeing a Tunisia that is able to stabilize its economy, to consider its path forward with respect to these economic reforms negotiated with the IMF, to take the tangible steps necessary to advance constitutional democratic governance, we really see these as the fundamental actions that will change the trajectory and begin to address the significant vulnerabilities that our adversaries are trying to exploit there.

Senator YOUNG. The Government of Tunisia—the current leadership clearly recognizes that there is a near-term need to stabilize the economy in order to, if not serve the people, at least strengthen their own position within the government.

At the same time you have China pulling back on its investments from Africa more generally, but more specifically from Tunisia.

I guess the question is as you seek to balance these different forces, do you see an opportunity to at once use the opportunity to invest in Tunisia for purposes of economic stability and to help the people, but also to push them into a position of—onto a path of better behavior?

Mr. HARRIS. With regard to our assistance activities, I would say we are constantly looking at the diplomatic tools that we have and that includes assistance programs.

This is something that that is not static, but we are continuously looking at through the lens of making sure the activities we are undertaking are those that are addressing the economic needs of vulnerable communities, as my colleague spoke to, and contributing to those trying to work towards an inclusive political future.

Senator YOUNG. Right.

Mr. HARRIS. Where we have opportunities and where conditions may warrant a course correction that is, obviously, something—

Senator YOUNG. I know you are attempting to answer the question. It is a very vague response to an observation that leverage exists and it may be an opportunity to tie certain investments in Tunisia to better behavior as the Chinese pull back.

Mr. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. Thanks.

We will do a second round here because I think we have got a few more topics to explore. Let me try to tie a bow on this concern I have about the muddled message we are sending through your funding request.

Just to maybe follow up on your response, Ms. Doherty, are you—is our reduction in funding for civil society and human rights—I mean, it is pretty exceptional. We are zeroing out funding for human rights. We have got a budget that has a zero on the human rights line item for Tunisia.

Are we doing that to send a signal? Are we doing that because we do not think that we can get money to the people that need it? Or are we doing that because, as you referenced in your answer to my first question, we are going to make up for that money somewhere else?

I just do not—I do not quite understand what message we are sending when we are holding military aid constant, but we are reducing aid to civil society. When I hear your testimony it kind of sounds like if what you were saying was true we would be seeing a budget request that suggested the opposite.

Ms. DOHERTY. Thank you, Senator.

For human rights funding specifically, I will refer you to my colleague from the State Department, but as it relates to civil society, the new budget figures they reflect a few things, some of which you mentioned.

One is the changed operating environment. The other is the pivoting away from—we had some quite large-scale programs planned with the Tunisian Government that we are no longer doing and at the same time we are using some of our prior year funding.

That is where the \$60 million investment in social safety net for vulnerable Tunisian families and the new program that I mentioned that we will be launching soon, the \$25 million scale up for civil society.

Senator MURPHY. Let me ask you about—Mr. Harris, about that cut to human rights funding.

Mr. HARRIS. Senator, certainly, human rights is a central aspect of our engagement. That is true worldwide. It is true in Tunisia as well.

With regard to the budget in particular, in addition to the bilateral lines that you made reference to there is an overall increase in the budget requested for democracy, human rights, and governance programming across the State Department and USAID that presents opportunities to mobilize in support of the Tunisian people and address these very serious issues. That includes issues related to the freedom of expression, the fundamental contributions that a vibrant civil society has to play.

Both programmatically and frankly in terms of policy we see this as something quite fundamental that we are doing in Tunisia and our policy engagements as well from the Secretary on down.

In all of our conversations with the Tunisian Government, this is a central element and I believe in the request that we have brought forward through this overall global requested increase we are requesting the tools in order to advance that.

Senator MURPHY. I understand that many of these decisions are made by others and not you. I understand this is a broader set of

decision makers, but I just do not think that is true. I just do not think it is true that if your primary objective is to support civil society and human rights that this is a budget that reflects that priority. I just do not think that is true.

Maybe you are right that you are going to find money for Tunisia through some other mechanism, but you know and the Administration knows that when you put a budget that zeros out funding for that specific line item people are going to take a message from it.

Let me turn to another piece of policy and that is the pending compact with MCC. The State Department is a board member and my understanding is that this contract has been on hold since August of 2021 waiting to see how constitutional reforms and parliamentary elections would go, but the benchmarks that we were looking for have come and gone, and from what I understand the MCC compact is still sort of sitting out there in the ether, a possibility.

What benchmarks are we looking for? What are the next benchmarks that will educate the decision we make on the MCC and is not the MCC compact still being a potential for Tunisia another signal that the United States' message on Saied's march away from democracy continues to be muddled?

Mr. HARRIS. Mr. Chairman, as you know the MCC board has spoken to how it is unable to advance the proposed compact with Tunisia at this time, but certainly has looked forward to the MCC continuance engagements should conditions evolve.

As the State Department we have been consulting quite regularly with our MC colleagues on this matter. One aspect of that coordination reflects that the MCC, of course, is mandated by statute to provide assistance to eligible countries that demonstrate a commitment to just and democratic governance.

As an overall point with respect to our assistance, I would say we are continuing to engage with the Tunisian Government, reflecting that we do not see the possibility of business as usual amid this crisis and that very tangible steps by the Tunisian Government are going to be needed to restore confidence and the types of specific things that we have discussed in that context are issues related to, for example, the trying of civilians in military courts, the restrictions—perceived restrictions on civil society, the targeting of individuals based on allegations of false news, fundamental actions to promote an inclusive political future.

That is what is going to create the conditions, more broadly, for us to have the strongest possible relationship with Tunisia.

Senator MURPHY. Yes. I think we just may have a difference of opinion as to whether those reforms are possible or whether Saied has made a pretty concrete decision as to which direction he is going to push his country in.

Let me ask you to sort of look retrospectively. Over the course of about 10 years we have spent \$274 million on supporting Tunisian democracy, something that we were very proud of as a country.

I remember going there with Senator McCain to celebrate the success of Tunisian democracy. Tunisia is—I joke that it is just twice the size of Indiana, but it is still a pretty big country. Two hundred and seventy-four million dollars is a lot of money to Amer-

ican taxpayers, but it is a relatively small amount of money when you are trying to support a nascent democracy.

What lessons do we draw from the investments that we made over 10 years in Tunisian democracy that arguably did not pan out the way that we had hoped? Is it a question of misallocating resources?

Is it a question of it just not being enough? Is it a question of circumstances on the ground moving in directions with such a strong current that there was no amount of American spending that was going to sort of stop this slide away from democracy?

Or is it that that money that we spend can still pay dividends in the future, that we help support a group of reformers and activists that are still making good trouble and standing up for Tunisian democracy?

What do we think about the way in which we supported Tunisian democracy for 10 years that has looked like a successful partnership that now looks a little bit more sour?

Ms. DOHERTY. Senator, I can answer on the assistance side. I mean, this is one of the questions that has been in my mind a lot lately, and I think one of the biggest lessons that we have learned looking at Tunisia is in terms of the importance of the long game and these longer-term investments.

Civil society and democracy, as you know so well from your many years in the region and your service in the world, they do not develop overnight. They do not do that in Tunisia. They do not do that in any other country.

What we have seen through various starts and stumbles in the decade following 2011 is significant strides from those investments that we have made. The organizations that I remember from the early days in 2011 where you would have two or three people saying, I want to form a civil society organization—I am not sure what that means—or people saying I would like to understand how an actual democratic election works, and what we have seen since then these incredible organizations that have pushed for more accountability, that have influenced legislation, the first ever Tunisian election observer network has been one of the most impressive ones in the region. They have done truly incredible work.

They have mobilized hundreds and actually millions of voters and educated people across the country and what we are seeing right now is that these are the same organizations, so the same organizations and individuals that are on the frontlines of trying to reclaim their country's democracy. They are countering disinformation, misinformation.

As I mentioned, they are continuing to observe electoral processes. I do not think they would be able to do that if we had not had that sustained investment over the last decade, but to your question of, okay, then how did we end up in the place where we are right now, I think this is not ultimately a resourcing issue. This is not a matter of assistance programs. Some of these drivers are inherently political.

Senator MURPHY. Senator Young is on his way back, as I understand, for a second round. Let me ask a question of both of you, but I think you previewed it in your testimony, Ms. Doherty, and that is the information space.

I was really blown away during my brief visit to Tunisia to learn that I was an agent of Ennahda and that I was simply in Tunisia to front for the Muslim Brotherhood.

It was pretty impressive how the misinformation campaign had really overwhelmed the U.S. embassy there and they were unable to get out ahead of a narrative that the United States was showing up with a very political partisan agenda that was totally disconnected from reality, completely disconnected from reality.

The United States does not play favorites. We do not pick sides. I had no idea who these people were that they claimed that I was aligned with, but the narrative was so powerful and it was so clear to me that we did not have the tools to set the record straight.

I am the author of the Global Engagement Center. I am a proud believer that the State Department now has more capacities to fight back against propaganda, but maybe describe to me the challenge of the information space inside Tunisia today and what new tools you need and our diplomats need just to make sure that people understand the truth about America's agenda.

We clearly have lost or are losing that fight right now and I am not sure who is funding all the misinformation. That is not all coming domestically, and maybe you can also suggest to me who is putting all of that false information about the U.S. agenda into the information space.

Ms. DOHERTY. Thank you, Senator.

I will admit I followed your trip while you were there and I was also surprised to see some of the headlines and the rumors swirling about your visit.

As you noted well, the information landscape is incredibly fraught right now. We have seen a real rise in mis- and disinformation. That is one of the reasons as part of the assistance pivot that we were describing earlier we are trying to drill more into the countering disinformation, countering misinformation space.

To give you a few examples, we have been working with our Tunisian partners, who are far more tech savvy than I, but they have created a fact-checking platform that is being used right now by independent media outlets to help them identify and to combat disinformation and also hate speech.

We are also trying to help our partners get certified with entities like—international standard entities like the International Federation—Fact-Checking Network, the IFCN, so that platform that is recognized by most major social media companies and actually helps them take down posts in real time much more effectively.

We have also been training hundreds of journalists in media literacy and also helping them put out content. We launched a media literacy broadcast program that is designed to educate Tunisians on how to spot fake news, falsehoods, disinformation, and some of this work has—through our tracking has reached about 700,000 Tunisians so far, but we are hoping to grow it because it is such an important space for investment.

Senator MURPHY. Well, listen, I would suggest that the good work you are doing in this space is reason to double down and I would hope that we would look to plus up those capacities in the coming budget.

Before I turn it over to Senator Young for a second round just a final question to you, Mr. Harris. Talk a little bit about the Gulf's role and interests in Tunisia. I do not think that they have always been terribly constructive.

At the same time, my impression is that President Saied was maybe hoping to get more no-strings economic help from the Gulf than he has received and perhaps he is now more potentially reliant on China, in part because the Gulf is equally as reluctant as the IMF to get in deep to support an economy without reform.

Talk to me a little bit about what our Gulf partners' interests are in Tunisia and whether they are always aligned with our interests.

Mr. HARRIS. Senator, what we have seen in our conversations with Gulf partners is a very high degree of concern about the economic instability, in the first instance, that is playing out in Tunisia, and in a context where the Tunisian Government has developed reforms that have won support from the IMF, but as we have seen reflected in President Saied's own statements not as yet taken the decision to move forward with that reform program.

Any financial contributions that may be contemplated from the Gulf have not advanced. Our sense is that there is broadly a willingness to support reforms with the IMF, but the fundamental question of whether or not that happens or goes forward really does not rest in Gulf capitals, but back in Tunis.

The question fundamentally is is the Tunisian Government going to be able to advance its own set of reforms. If so, I think there is a broad range of countries including some within the Gulf that would be prepared to support that, motivated by a serious concern about the consequences of instability, but those investments cannot go anywhere if there is not a decision in Tunis to enable the IMF path in the first place.

Senator MURPHY. I think that is positive that the Gulf has stayed, largely, aligned with the IMF goals. I would assume, though, that they have not been as enthusiastic on political reform as they have been on economic reform.

Their focus is more on economic reform. They are not whispering in Saied's ears to reverse the slide away from democratic norms.

Mr. HARRIS. I cannot speak with any authority to conversations that another government may be having in Tunis. I can tell you in our own conversations with Gulf partners what we are reflecting is that we see economic and political empowerment as fundamentally linked and that the way to address the economic instability concerns that they are voicing is, on the one hand, certainly to enable this reform program negotiated with the IMF to restore the macro economy to health.

At the same time and in the same breath tangible steps to put things on the path of democratic and constitutional governance are vital to address those same instability concerns.

Senator MURPHY. I will turn it over to Senator Young.

I think that is a very nimble answer. I think it is okay for the Administration to say that the Gulf is not as interested in political reform as they are in economic reform. I do not think you are going to make the Gulf upset if you say on the record that the Gulf countries are not terribly interested in midwifing healthy democracies in the region.

I appreciate your answer. I think that is right, that we believe the two are linked and we continue to make that case, but I think we have to understand that our alliance with the Gulf on Tunisia policies is limited.

Senator Young.

Senator YOUNG. Thank you, Chairman, for the benefit. I know our witnesses understand, but anyone else I had to step out and make sure that my constituents were enfranchised. It turned out for the benefit of the chairman, votes were somehow withdrawn. I am still trying to figure out this place.

Senator MURPHY. It is a nice walk.

Senator YOUNG. Yes. It was a nice saunter.

One of the things I would like to explore in light of Tunisia's economic challenges, their high inflation, and the interest so many Tunisians have in getting foreign direct investment into the country is this IMF loan.

I understand that blocking the IMF loan could at worst case crash the Tunisian economy, leading to much higher inflation, even hyperinflation, and default on debt obligations.

With that in mind, Ms. Doherty or Mr. Harris, how involved should the United States be in Tunisia's negotiations with the IMF and how might we use this as an opportunity to require tangible rule of law reforms from President Saied?

Mr. HARRIS. Senator, I agree with the characterization that you described of how central finding a path to address these reforms negotiated with the IMF is.

As you know, last year the Tunisian Government, in response to a very serious series of external shocks including Russia's aggression compounding decades of deferred reform developed a reform package that, if implemented, would enable the government to better manage the public wage bill, to ensure subsidies are targeted to those in greatest need, to restore state-owned enterprises to a degree of sustainability and health.

That program in October of last year, with our active engagement and consultation with the Tunisian Government, with the IMF, with international partners, but fundamentally based on the reforms that Tunisia itself developed won support and enabled Tunisia to conclude a staff level agreement.

As President Saied has indicated publicly, he has as yet decided not to move forward with crucial elements of that reform program and, thus, that program is unable to advance to the IMF board for approval. As we were discussing just a moment ago, a number of international partners have generously stepped forward to provide support, but only in the context of that IMF program.

As we are approaching this and as Secretary Blinken, Assistant Secretary Leaf, others in the Administration have communicated directly to the Tunisian Government, we are prepared to support Tunisia in moving forward on this reform program.

The fundamental question is where they are if Tunisia chooses to do so. There is a fundamental decision point faced in Tunis about these matters.

Senator YOUNG. I am inferring that the U.S. Government is prepared to support Tunisia in implementing these reforms, not just so that they can secure consummation of the IMF assistance, but

also because we believe that the reform program would increase the level of stability in Tunisia as opposed to undermining it as oftentimes fiscal austerity measures do.

Mr. HARRIS. Certainly. As we are looking at it, a Tunisia that continues to unravel in this way economically where Tunisian individuals and households are struggling to access and purchase basic consumer goods, medicine, is not an environment that is most conducive to the type of democratic governance that we all want to see nor one in which our other priorities in the country could be advanced.

For that reason we have been very intensively engaged with Tunisians to support this reform program, but again this is fundamentally a question of Tunisian policy and whether or not they choose to proceed.

Senator YOUNG. Let us assume the government changes heart, changes its mind and implements the reform program, receives the IMF assistance. At that point, will President Saied feel emboldened to act with greater disregard from the rule of law? If yes, why? If not, why not?

Mr. HARRIS. It is difficult for me to speculate about future actions. What I would say is as we are kind of assessing the situation right now, if Tunisia were to make a decision to move forward with this reform program and thus the program negotiated last October could go forward to IMF board approval, that would begin to provide just a little bit of breathing room.

Tunisians that are really hurting, that are really hurting economically—I have spent a lot of time in the country including recently and you feel this on a very visceral level. The human cost of this economic situation is very serious and that directly plays back to the political situation.

Even in discussing with Tunisian counterparts, the recent elections cycle what we often hear is it is very difficult to put one's full energies and attention behind these very serious political matters and elections process, these fundamental questions of Tunisia moving forward with constitutional governance, where these very human needs cannot be met in a time of economic unraveling.

Senator YOUNG. I can certainly understand how one would make either argument in the wake of receiving an infusion of funds. That is either emboldening the president to continue to disregard the rule of law and basic human rights or going the other direction.

As the Administration continues to assess that important question and resolves the matter I hope they will be in touch with Senator Murphy and myself.

How would either of you rate the potential for Tunisia to default on its debt obligations and what would be the impact of that?

Mr. HARRIS. We spend a considerable amount of time both internally and with our Tunisian counterparts to understand the macroeconomic outlay.

What we have seen in recent months is that the professionals—the Tunisian economic officials are taking the measures that you would expect in a very difficult environment to stabilize to the extent possible the situation.

That includes steps to address tax collection. There has been greater domestic borrowing. The overall global energy markets

have provided a little bit of additional breathing room very modestly within the Tunisian budget this year. Those are prudent measures.

At the same time, they cannot substitute for a sustainable solution. With regard specifically to the debt outlook, Tunisia, over the coming year, has a number of external financing obligations.

This is simply one—another reason—a critical reason why finding a path forward on these economic reforms, if that is what Tunisia chooses to do, is so vital. Thus far, the sum of these extraordinary measures, including domestic borrowing and the use of foreign exchange reserves, have limits and simply cannot substitute and really address the—those fundamental stability questions.

Senator YOUNG. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. I will ask—I know Senator Booker is on his way. I will ask one last question. If he is not here, we can close the hearing down. You guys have been very generous with your time.

Mr. Harris, maybe give an assessment to the committee of the health of the political opposition today. Again, these are powerful forces that can align behind reform—the public employee unions, the bar, but Saied has also engaged in a pretty deliberate campaign to make it harder for those entities to join together, to speak up, and to contest the changes he has made.

While I was there, again, a long time ago, he was very popular and my sense is he is maybe not as popular, but he still has a decent amount of support in the country. What is the state of the array of individuals and institutions that are opposing the changes he has made to democratic norms and is there liability one of—one imposed by Saied and his repression or by a public that is not yet ready to give up on Saied and his reform plan?

Mr. HARRIS. Mr. Chairman, prior to July of 2021 in our experience when you ask many Tunisians how things were going in terms of the political health, there is both on the one hand a very deep visceral connection to the freedom of expression and hard-won gains of 2011 and, yet, on the other hand, a deep frustration with the unfulfilled realizations, a deep frustration with a—the perception of a ruling class, institutions that left many Tunisians behind, particularly with respect to delivering the tangible economic stability and prosperity.

In that context, since July 25, 2021, what we have seen is, on the one hand, kind of a real concern about official corruption, about the behavior of elites, the perception of a disconnect between those in power and those that they purportedly would represent and to some degree that has been reflected in a recognition that changes in the Tunisian political system are needed.

On the other hand, the issues related to the freedom of expression, the shrinking of the space for genuine debate, is a very serious matter and one that, to my knowledge and from my own experience, is of broad concern.

The hard-fought gains of 2011 have, as Secretary Blinken has spoken to publicly, to some degree have been reversed and the concern about that closing of space for debate is of broad concern.

At this point, I cannot say I think that there is unanimity across the Tunisian space on these matters. I do think, on the one hand,

there is broad concern about some of these underlying deep systemic challenges, serious concerns about corruption, and yet recognition that freedom of expression in this vibrant culture is really critical to where most Tunisians would like the country to go.

Senator MURPHY. Does that space still exist? Are you confident that if the Tunisian people made the decision that they wanted to go in a different direction that the campaign of repression has not become so effective and limiting they would not be able to have their way?

Mr. HARRIS. I think there is no question that we have witnessed an alarming erosion of these democratic norms, including with respect to human rights, including the freedom of expression.

That is something that we have heard very clearly reflected in a multitude of conversations with Tunisians in the government and outside of the government, but at the same time, these are issues of deep emotional resonance in my experience with Tunisians. The culture of freedom of expression, the culture of freedom to criticize, to say what you want, to speak your mind is one that is very deeply felt and for that reason part of our engagement with the Tunisian Government since July of 2021 has been to engage on the fundamental need to repudiate any notion, any self-censorship, any perception, that Tunisians will face reprisals for speaking their mind. That is something—an ongoing conversation that we are still having with the Tunisian Government.

Senator MURPHY. Well, thank you both for your testimony today. Thank you for your commitment to the U.S.-Tunisia relationship.

We are going to keep the record open for questions until the close of business on Friday. If we get any additional questions, we will forward them to you.

With that, thanks to the subcommittee and the staff, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:08 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF MR. JOSHUA HARRIS TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CORY A. BOOKER

Question. Food Security: Tunisia’s food security crisis is a symptom of its own domestic turmoil and external events. Ukraine accounted for nearly half of Tunisia’s wheat imports prior to Russia’s invasion, and the Black Sea Grain Initiative has only restored limited supplies. The uncertainty surrounding the extension of the grain deal has caused a recent spike in wheat prices. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has projected below-average wheat and barley harvests in Tunisia this year due to “insufficient rainfall and high temperatures.”

Given Tunisia’s history of bread riots, what is the risk that continued supply disruptions and price volatility of wheat will spark widespread unrest and cause political instability?

Answer. Disruptions in global food and energy markets spurred by Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, have compounded structural weaknesses in Tunisia’s public finances and already contributed to the heightened risk of instability in Tunisia. Continued supply disruptions and food price volatility would likely exacerbate the economic emergency in Tunisia and increase this risk. We remain focused on ensuring that U.S. economic and development assistance to Tunisia is directly benefitting the Tunisian people, including in terms of mitigating food insecurity. To this end, the United States, through USAID in partnership with the World Bank and UNICEF, is enabling the purchase of 25,000 metric tons of American durum wheat and providing

\$60 million in support to vulnerable Tunisian families as the Tunisian people face supply disruptions and increased prices fueled by Russia's aggression.

Question. What role can Congress play in prioritizing U.S. Government food aid support for countries like Tunisia that are affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's continued manipulation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative?

Answer. We fully share the concern about the harmful impact in Tunisia of the food insecurity exacerbated by Russia's aggression in Ukraine and manipulation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. In October 2022, we announced \$60 million in direct assistance to the most vulnerable Tunisians amid the broad array of economic shocks they face. In April 2023, we announced a partnership with the World Bank to help finance the purchase of 25,000 metric tons of American durum wheat. We are also working with the World Bank to strengthen Tunisia's grain supply chain to mitigate potential future disruptions. Congress continues to play a vital role in highlighting the tangible impact of Russia's aggression on food insecurity in Tunisia and enabling U.S. programs that promote greater security and prosperity for the Tunisia people.

RESPONSES OF MS. MEGAN DOHERTY TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CORY A. BOOKER

Question. According to a USAID press release dated April 21, the United States, in partnership with the World Bank, has financed the purchase of 25,000 metric tons of American durum wheat to help the Tunisian people deal with supply disruptions caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The release also stated that USAID will send agricultural experts to provide recommendations on how to increase the country's resilience.

What was the reaction of the Tunisian Government to the announcement of the wheat donation? What do the Tunisian people blame for supply disruptions?

How will USAID leverage technical assistance on food security to advance Tunisian administrative reforms? Will U.S.-funded agricultural experts make policy recommendations related to subsidies and price caps?

Answer. USAID established a partnership with the World Bank to finance a wheat donation under a broader World Bank-led social safety net effort. The Tunisian Government has been supportive of the World Bank's efforts to strengthen the social protection system in Tunisia, as a part of the COVID-19 response initiated in 2021. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a public statement of appreciation, and the Ministries of Agriculture and Social Affairs also expressed their appreciation for U.S. assistance.

Since 2020, Tunisians have seen an increase in supply disruptions, which are frequently attributed in the press and public discourse to government mismanagement and the global impact of Russia's war in Ukraine.

To ensure a more sustainable approach to food insecurity in Tunisia, part of USAID's collaboration with the World Bank will include analyses for a broader food security policy reform agenda, which may include recommendations to improve agricultural-related subsidies; identification of more efficient ways to procure cereals; and development of a 10-year reform strategy. While the Tunisian Government is aware of the impact of subsidies on their national debt, the President has been reluctant to cut politically sensitive subsidies.