

**THE ENDURING IMPACT OF FRENCH COLONIALISM AND THE
JASMINE REVOLUTION IN TUNISIA**

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Figure 1 - [A large building with flags flying in front of it photo – Free Tunisie Image on Unsplash](#) photo by Hammami Ghazi

Introduction

Tunisia, located in North Africa, is renowned for its rich history and cultural diversity. The country has been a crossroads for various civilisations as it is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north and east, Algeria to the west, and Libya to the southeast. The country is a popular tourist destination, boasting stunning landscapes from the Sahara Desert in the south to fertile plains and beautiful beaches in the north. This report delves into Tunisia's precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial epochs, offering an overview of the nation's history, economy, and politics. By doing so, it aims to shed light on crucial considerations for engaging in business or social endeavours within the Republic of Tunisia.



Figure 2 – Map of Tunisia

Understanding Tunisia: A Look into Its History, Culture, And Socio-Political Landscape

Tunisia's precolonial history is a tapestry of influential civilisations and empires, with the indigenous Amazigh community playing a crucial role. The term "Amazigh" is preferred to the commonly used "Berber" as it has more respectful connotations. The Imazghen (plural of Amazigh) have a rich and ancient history that spans thousands of years. Indigenous to North Africa, these communities are present across Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Aïtel, 2014; Youcef, 2020: 85).

Archaeological findings suggest that the Imazighen have inhabited the region for at least several millennia, potentially dating back to prehistoric times. Their cultural and linguistic heritage is one of the oldest in North Africa, and their roots are deeply intertwined with the history of the multiple communities that have traversed the Maghreb and Saharan regions (Ferguson & Muscato, 2023). Their presence in the region predates recorded history, contributing significantly to the establishment and rise of Carthage in the 9th century BCE.

Carthage, a dominant maritime power known for its fierce rivalry with Rome, produced leaders like Hannibal, who had Amazigh origins. After Carthage's fall in 146 BCE, Tunisia became a prosperous Roman province, blending cultures under Roman rule with impressive architectural developments still visible today. Following the decline of the Roman Empire, the region saw successive waves of conquerors, including the Vandals, Byzantines, and Arabs, in the 7th century CE. The Amazigh adapted to these changes, adopting Islam while preserving their cultural identity. This rich precolonial heritage, marked by the resilience and adaptability of the Amazigh, set the stage for Tunisia's complex and dynamic historical narrative.

In the late 19th century, European interest in North Africa intensified, leading to the establishment of the French Protectorate in Tunisia in 1881 (Houssi, 2017: 68). Under French rule, Tunisia experienced profound political, social, and economic changes, many of which came at a heavy cost to the local population. The colonial administration's infrastructure projects, such as railways and ports, primarily served French economic interests, facilitating the extraction and export of Tunisia's resources (Perkins, 2014). This period saw rampant exploitation and systemic marginalisation of Tunisians, with French settlers acquiring vast tracts of fertile land, displacing many indigenous farmers, and exacerbating social inequalities. The colonial regime imposed harsh measures to suppress dissent, further alienating the local population. After nearly 70 years of French occupation, the French government granted the North African country autonomy over its internal affairs in 1954. This recognition paved the way for Tunisia's formal independence two years later (Houssi, 2017: 68).

Amidst this oppression, numerous strong nationalist independence movements emerged, which are crucial to consider in Tunisia's history. They play a significant role in understanding the series of events that ultimately led to the country's decolonisation. Tunisia's journey to independence was significantly influenced by various nationalist leaders and movements and inspired by trends in Turkey, Egypt, and the reformist Vizir Ḥayr al-Dīn. The first notable movement, Jeunes Tunisiens (Young Tunisians), emerged in 1907 under al-Bašīr Šafar and ʿAlī Bāš Ḥānbah (Perkins, 2014; Houssi, 2017: 68). Post-World War I, the Parti Libéral Constitutionnel (Dustūr), led by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Taʿālbī, called for parliamentary representation (Perkins, 2014: 132; Houssi, 2017: 69). In 1934, a faction broke away from Dustūr to form Néo-Dustūr, led by al-Ḥabīb Būrġībah, which ultimately became the driving force behind Tunisia's independence (Houssi, 2017: 69). These evolving nationalist movements laid the foundation for Tunisia's decolonisation.

Intellectuals, workers, and political leaders like Habib Bourguiba mobilised to challenge colonial rule, often facing brutal repression. Protests, strikes, and violent confrontations marked the struggle for independence, reflecting the deep-seated resentment against colonial exploitation. The relentless efforts of the nationalist movement, combined with pressures from global decolonisation, eventually forced France to concede. Tunisia's hard-fought independence was achieved on 20th March 1956, marking the end of colonial rule and the beginning of a new era for the nation, characterised by a renewed sense of identity, hope, and self-determination.

From Independence to The Jasmine Revolution

Following its hard-won independence in 1956, Tunisia embarked on a nation-building path under Habib Bourguiba's leadership, who became its first president. Bourguiba implemented progressive social reforms,

particularly in education and women's rights, and pursued a policy of modernisation and secularisation. However, his long rule eventually turned authoritarian, leading to widespread discontent (Perkins, 2014). In 1987, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali assumed power through a bloodless coup, initially promising political reforms but soon establishing a repressive regime marked by corruption, human rights abuses, and economic disparity (Perkins, 2014). Under Ben Ali, Tunisia's projected stability was ensured at the cost of deep political regression. The regime's pervasive and thorough suppression of civil and political liberties through intimidation stifled any dissent and fostered widespread corruption at multiple levels. Despite rampant human rights violations, restricted political freedoms, and extensive corruption, Ben Ali and his inner circle managed to maintain popular support by distributing social benefits (Ayadi et al., 2011: 2). The European Union and other external actors largely backed Ben Ali's regime, influenced by his commitment to neo-liberal economic reforms and cooperation in achieving EU goals, such as combating terrorism and illegal migration (Ayadi et al., 2011: 2).

The growing discontent culminated in the 2010-2011 Jasmine Revolution, which ignited the Arab Spring and led to Ben Ali's removal (Ghanem, 2016). The Tunisian Revolution, characterised by extensive civil resistance and street demonstrations, was ignited by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old vegetable vendor in Sidi Bouzid. After a confrontation with police over his "unauthorised" cart, Bouazizi, who relied on the cart to support his mother and six siblings, was slapped in the face by an officer. He was turned away when he sought help from the municipality and governorate. Feeling humiliated, angry, and frustrated, he set himself on fire in front of the governorate headquarters. This act sparked a wave of uprisings in Sidi Bouzid, across Tunisia, and quickly spread to the rest of the Arab world (Ghanem, 2016: 63). Within 28 days, these protests forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to resign on 14th January 2011, ending his 23-year rule (Ayadi et al., 2011: 2; Ghanem, 2016). The ensuing unrest, driven by grievances over unemployment, food inflation, corruption, and poor living conditions, quickly spread across the country and galvanised other movements across the MENA region.

The subsequent transition was challenging, yet Tunisia distinguished itself by adopting a new constitution in 2014. The state held free and fair elections in October 2011, setting a precedent for democratic governance in the region (Miller et al., 2012: 76). Despite ongoing economic and security challenges, Tunisia's postcolonial journey and its pivotal role in the Arab Spring highlight its resilience and the continuing quest for democratic ideals. Tunisia's current president is Kais Saied, who has been in office since October 2019. A former law professor with no prior political experience, Saied won a landslide victory as an independent candidate, appealing to voters with his strong anti-corruption stance and promises to reform the political system. His presidency has been marked by significant political turbulence, including the suspension of parliament in July 2021 and subsequent consolidation of power, raising concerns about the future of Tunisia's democracy. Despite the challenges, Saied remains a polarising figure, with supporters praising his efforts to tackle corruption and critics decrying his perceived authoritarian approach. Saied has recently called a presidential election for 6th October 2024, yet many of his political opponents are behind bars, setting him up for probable re-election (AlJazeera, 2024).

Enduring Impact of French Colonisation and Tunisia's Global Positioning

As in colonial and postcolonial contexts everywhere, Tunisia still bears deep scars and experiences lingering impacts. Since independence in 1956, Tunisia's relationship with France has been marked by cooperation and complexity. Initially, Tunisia relied on French support for economic aid, infrastructure development, and technical assistance. However, tensions arose as Tunisia asserted its sovereignty and developed a distinct national identity, particularly over political interference and economic inequalities. While key agreements have focused on trade and economic cooperation, French influence remains significant, with enduring cultural and economic ties. Despite its turbulent past, Tunisia strives for political and financial independence, aligning more with its Arab-Muslim identity at the governmental level, even though society at the local level remains diverse in culture and religion.

Tunisia's foreign policy emphasises diplomatic neutrality, regional stability, and economic partnerships. Strategically located in North Africa along the Mediterranean, Tunisia maintains balanced relations with Western and Arab nations. It is an active member of the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League and has traditionally sought peaceful relations with neighbours like Algeria and Libya. The Republic's regional and foreign strategies prioritise security and counter-terrorism cooperation (Ayadi et al., 2011: 2).

Recently, Tunisia has shifted its foreign policy to reduce dependence on France and diversify international partnerships. Tunisia seeks enhanced economic opportunities, diplomatic support, and investment by emphasising stronger ties with global players like the European Union, the United States, China, and the Middle East and African regional actors. This strategy aims to achieve greater economic stability and political leverage in a rapidly changing global landscape.

For instance, Tunisia has strengthened ties with the European Union, its largest trade partner, to boost trade, investment, and tourism. In July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and comprehensive partnership. This initiative aims to revitalise bilateral relations and covers five key areas of cooperation: macroeconomic stability, economy and trade, green energy transition, people-to-people connections, and migration and mobility. The MoU provides a detailed framework for the Commission to assist Tunisia in addressing current challenges, such as maintaining macroeconomic stability and managing migration, while exploring collaborative opportunities in sectors of mutual interest (European Commission, 2024).

Future Trajectories and Challenges

Since the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia's democratic transition has received substantial international support from Western nations and financial institutions, providing aid and investment for economic reforms and development projects. However, Tunisia continues to grapple with economic dependencies and complex regional dynamics. President Saied's recent power consolidation has exacerbated the country's decade-long financial crisis, with unemployment at 15% and about one-third of the population living in poverty (AlJazeera, 2024). Contributing to the tense political climate is Saied's crackdown on dissent, which has resulted in the prosecution of over 60 journalists, lawyers, and political opponents.

Tunisia, like many North African countries, also faces challenges with negrophobic attitudes towards its indigenous African communities and migrants from other parts of the continent (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This, coupled with its Arab nationalist-leaning government, hinders its official relations with the rest of Africa.

Tunisia's future in global partnerships will likely hinge on developing strategic alliances beyond its traditional ties with France. The country is strengthening relations with emerging economies like China, which has become a significant partner through the Belt and Road Initiative and exploring partnerships with Turkey and the Gulf States to expand its economic and political influence. These evolving relationships are expected to support Tunisia's goals of achieving greater financial independence and political autonomy, helping the nation navigate global complexities and secure a more resilient and self-reliant position on the world stage.

Key challenges and considerations for the Republic of Tunisia include defining its role and priorities in African international relations, migration, climate, and trade. The country must project proper stability and democracy, ensuring care for all communities within its borders. Achieving this requires balancing grassroots initiatives with top-down governance and avoiding international interventions that lack inclusive and intersectional rights for Tunisians.

Conclusion

This report has offered brief insights into Tunisia's history, current socio-political landscape, foreign relations, and economic trajectory. It aims to be a valuable resource for those seeking collaboration with the Republic. Understanding the country's historical, cultural, and political context is paramount for entities wishing to engage with Tunisia successfully. Tunisians value their sovereignty and autonomy, requiring partnerships founded on mutual respect and benefit. Therefore, potential collaborators should approach engagements sensitively to Tunisia's aspirations for true, transparent democracy. Demonstrating a commitment to sustainable development and environmental stewardship can further strengthen partnerships with Tunisia, aligning with the nation's long-term objectives. Moreover, fostering open communication channels and building trust-based relationships is crucial for effectively navigating Tunisia's dynamic and evolving landscape.

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