

AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCH: HOW TO HELP TUNISIANS DEFEND THEIR DEMOCRACY

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SUMMARY

- Recent arrests and protests in Tunisia are a sign of growing instability in the country and panic in the government over waning public support.
- President Kais Saied seized full power more than 18 months ago but he has spent his time embedding autocracy through constitutional reform rather than attending to Tunisia's economic and social problems.
- The president's indecisive and reclusive nature leaves Tunisia in economic limbo as he fails to show the leadership required, including to give confidence to international partners and financial institutions.
- Europeans have invested heavily in Tunisia. As the US contemplates disengaging from the country, the EU and its partners must assemble a 'coalition of the concerned' to put in place the support structures Tunisia will need to withstand Saied's inevitable crash.

Introduction

Gradually, then suddenly. The fate of Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, is already determined: his departure as head of state is inevitable, as is the chaos his failure will bring. The duty of Europeans is to act now to limit the damage he does as he falls. They must ensure Tunisia can move on to something better once he is gone.

In recent months, the Tunisian authorities have detained scores of political leaders, civil society advocates, businessmen, judges, and media personalities at the behest of the president. This campaign of arrests represents a significant escalation in Saied's takeover of the country after he suspended parliament in mid-2021, and later dissolved it.

Since seizing full control, Saied has relied on security services and military courts to implement his power grab. Tunisians find themselves thrown in jail for criticising the president, carrying out trade union activities, or even meeting with foreign citizens to discuss their country's future. But his *autogolpe* has done nothing to help matters. Rather than attend to the multiple problems Tunisia is facing, the president has spent his time engaged in clumsy constitutional reform that does little to support Tunisians and much to expand his own power.

To mask his failings, Saied is playing the populist, presenting himself as the victim of an international conspiracy; he explains away unrest and the declining economy as the product of neocolonialist policies from Europeans, Americans, and local "traitors". And, as things worsen, so does the scapegoating. Saied recently turned his sights on black immigrants, instigating mass assaults on them by suggesting a conspiracy was under way to turn Tunisia into a "purely African country" – a line straight out of the "Great Replacement" theory playbook.

The timing of the string of crises induced by Saied could not be worse for Tunisia. The economy has failed to recover from covid-19, the country struggles to import necessary goods, and spiralling inflation makes these unaffordable when they do arrive. The only real action from Saied so far in 2023 has been to appoint a new hardline interior minister who is nicknamed "Stalin."

As Tunisia's biggest neighbour, the European Union and its member states have remained largely muted in response to events in the country they once hoped would prove the success story of the 2011 Arab uprisings. The United States has been much more vocal, but recent diplomatic murmurings suggest Washington will not remain engaged in the country without Europeans raising their game.

Europeans' options for immediate action are relatively few, despite being Tunisia's largest trading partners, the largest foreign supporters of the Tunisian state, and the target of Tunisian flight of people and capital. Nevertheless, the EU and its member states remain the best placed to support Tunisian civil society and elements of Tunisia's state to survive Saied's onslaught. Assisting in this way is also firmly within European interests as the EU looks to 'nearshore' key supply chains such as energy and deepen relations with neighbours as the geopolitical picture grows ever cloudier.

Despite the drastic situation, hopes linger in some European capitals that Saied can be an effective strongman who will help manage migration and support other European interests. But this is misguided. Europeans' ultimate aim must now be to prepare for Saied's inevitable crash and plan constructive ways forward in its aftermath. To do this they should: build a 'coalition of the concerned' of international partners from the West and across the Middle East and North Africa; identify ways to keep Tunisia's financial life support going; push hard to free political prisoners to allow for an organic and unified opposition to develop; and use their influence with Tunisia's security services, which are increasingly Saied's only meaningful ballast in the country.

If they work together now, the EU and its partners can start to erect the scaffolding needed to keep Tunisia together – even as its leadership inexorably crumbles.

From hero – towards zero

In July 2021, Tunisia's president imposed a state of emergency, using article 80 of the country's then constitution to suspend the parliament and sack the prime minister. Despite the strong whiff of impending authoritarianism, many Tunisians nevertheless celebrated. Large numbers of people were fed up with the failure of the political class to address their everyday concerns. Ordinary Tunisians had become incensed at endless tales of corruption and internecine scrapping between political parties, which defined the seven years prior to Saied's coup. Government departments were stuffed with political appointees, which generated resentment among professional bureaucrats, created confused lines of authority, and killed productivity as multiple offices competed over projects. Many of those who worked in or with the government hoped for clearer command and control of policy and action. [1]

Saied has spent much of his nearly two years in complete control consumed with a political project to recreate Tunisia's constitutional order. The result has disappointed many. When he first seized power, politically engaged Tunisians and diplomats rushed to reread Saied's old campaign speeches and publications to try to understand the shape of politics to come. [2] The

impression formed of a pseudo-philosopher who spurned representative politics for direct democracy, held conservative values, and embodied many of the socialist sovereignty-centric tenets of Arab nationalist dictators in the tradition of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. But the implementation of his political ideology, supposedly the long-nurtured dream of this constitutional law professor, was shambolic, with multiple post-publication edits required to the constitution. In sum, his constitutional reforms have done little to articulate direct democracy and much to create an autocratic presidency. Disappointingly for the many who wished to work with him, these reforms and Saied's style of governance so far demonstrate little substance beyond absolute autocracy (including a disdain for delegation), a shallow understanding of economic matters and administration, a prickly disposition, and a disturbing reliance on conspiracism.[3]

Over the last 18 months, the president's popularity has steadily declined. Saied has called numerous elections for a variety of reasons to shore up his rule, but few Tunisians bother to turn out to vote. In fact, the most recent parliamentary election drew the second lowest turnout for a national election, anywhere in the world, since 1945. Nevertheless, Saied remains relatively secure in his post. Many Tunisians still regard him as the best of a bad lot, and hope he will tackle Tunisia's problems once free of the previous parliament's shackles – and that he will do this while also preserving the country's democratic character and popular freedoms, which ordinary Tunisians cherish.

Indeed, polling from 2022 confirms that many Tunisians feel disengaged with politics but consider the economy and corruption their greatest challenges. Following a decade of dysfunction, 81 per cent of Tunisians say they have no trust at all in their former parliament (and, by extension, the wider political class), while over 75 per cent agree that they do not care about the “kind of government so long as it solves their economic problems.” More than 80 per cent believe they need a leader who “bends the rules if necessary to get things done.” But democratic ideals remain popular with Tunisians – which may yet make life difficult for Saied: 72 per cent consider democracy better than other systems “despite its problems”. Large majorities believe in the importance of freedoms included in the poll, such as freedom of the press and freedom to participate in peaceful protest.

As the president's support fades, the realisation appears to be growing throughout Tunisia that he is failing to address the country's crises while stripping back people's core freedoms. This poses a considerable challenge to Saied. As the political system he created officially decouples from the old one, he will no longer be able to convincingly blame others for his failures. It also risks exposing him and his true character. Popular criticism of Saied is already becoming more visible. After the January 2023 parliamentary election, a larger than usual protest swelled past police lines and water cannon into Avenue Bourguiba – Tunis's main

thoroughfare, a location redolent with symbolism of the 2011 revolution.

Saied has attempted to distract from the unrest and this year's embarrassing election turnout by arresting leading civil society activists, judges, politicians, and more. It appears to be his way of restoring his strongman image. Some of those arrested even predicted this would happen once the elections were over and Saied felt freer to express his authoritarian instincts with his political system fully in place. Those detained include famous media figures such as Noureddine Boutar, director of Tunisia's largest independent news outlet, and prominent business and political personalities. Also among their number is Khayyam Turki, who had met with foreign diplomats and Tunisian politicians to try to build political consensus and develop ideas to reverse Tunisia's decline.

Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisia's flourishing civil society was the first popular expression of new freedoms. As Tunisia's democratic transition stalled, civil society became an important vehicle for the representation of popular views that had become marginalised by an increasingly self-obsessed political class. For example, political parties stalled on implementing key liberalising elements of the constitution, such as setting up committees to investigate corruption or establishing a constitutional court. In this way, civil society became the only forum for disenfranchised citizens to try to organise monitoring and accountability mechanisms, organise resistance to dangerous laws such as the 2015 counter-terrorism act, or discuss solutions to issues such as corruption that no longer interested the political class once they were in power. As a result, in the years prior to Saied coming to power, political leaders turned on civil society critics in an embodiment of the doublespeak of a self-proclaimed democratic order that appeared to value democratic freedoms less than ordinary citizens did.

A savvier politician than Saied would therefore have recognised civil society as an important means through which the president and his small executive team could increase their reach and enhance their policy capacity. Instead, under his rule civil society has found itself yet further marginalised and oppressed. Even the most influential of non-governmental organisations, Tunisia's general trade union (UGTT), is now under attack following the deterioration in its relationship between its secretary-general and the presidency. Anis Kaabi, the head of the highways branch of the UGTT, was recently arrested at his home for organising a strike of tollbooth workers. Saied is open about wanting to bully others into submission – as evidenced by an 18-minute rant to Ministry of Interior civil servants broadcast on Facebook in February 2023, when he urged officials to ignore all due process and treat his opponents as terrorists.

Saied's war on civil society breeds greater problems than just missing out on the ability to leverage their talents. It is generating unrest in the country and crippling Saied's ability to

form coalitions that could otherwise work to address the many crises Tunisia is facing. For example, Saied's snowballing conflict with the UGTT and others directly impacts on the state's ability to obtain a much-needed loan from the IMF, as union cooperation is crucial in implementing any of the demanded reforms.

Alongside his acts of repression, Saied has concentrated policymaking in the presidency's office at Carthage. He may have succeeded in ejecting political appointees from government ministries, but this centralising move has only created a new form of stalemate. On the major questions of the day and how to address them, silence now reigns.

Indeed, Saied took months even to appoint a government. When he finally did, it appeared disempowered and dependent on him for direction and authority. This left the new prime minister, Najla Bouden, in the difficult position of simultaneously acting as the face of the administration while being effectively powerless to act, despite the prime minister often impressing those she encounters with her considered approach to Tunisia's problems. [4]

Saied's small, overwhelmed team and unforgiving personal style have led him to lose allies as well as cadres of politicians and technocrats who were previously at least open to the possibility of working with him. This has led to resignations from his inner circle, most explosively of all his former chief of staff and key adviser Nadia Akacha. As a long-time trusted lieutenant, Akacha was rumoured to be one of the architects of his coup, yet she quit only six months afterwards due to "fundamental differences over Tunisia's best interests". A few months later, leaked audio messages emerged attributed to Akacha that contained shocking claims about the president's mental health and the state of his administration. Despite denying being the voice heard in the leaks she was nevertheless recently sentenced in absentia to 14 months in jail.

Akacha's is an instructive tale that reflects the experience of many who believed that the president shared their goal of a well-run country – only to find themselves betrayed and punished instead. Crucially, Saied's negative traits only seem to be worsening. Tunisia is in a downward spiral and its political, social, and economic problems will only continue to deteriorate while Saied reigns but barely rules.

Saied's economic timebomb

The profound limitations of a personalised, unpredictable, and uninformed form of governance are exposed by Saied's inadequate actions in the realm of the economy. Corruption and mismanagement related to covid-19 may have been the scandals Saied leveraged to overthrow the old order, but he has failed to deal with the economic legacy of the

pandemic. In 2020, Tunisia recorded the largest recession in its history, with a contraction of 8.7 per cent. The effects subsided the following year but the recovery never really got going: growth that year amounted to a meagre 3.3 per cent.

During 2022 – his first full year in complete control – real GDP growth fell to 2.2 per cent. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine caused inflationary spikes throughout global markets, pushing up Tunisian consumer prices by 10.4 per cent by February 2023. With unemployment officially at 15 per cent – though generally considered to be significantly worse than official numbers suggest – these dynamics are ravaging Tunisian living standards. Over 2022, basic goods such as sugar, rice, and vegetable oil started disappearing from the shelves. This contributed to sporadic protests towards the end of 2022, with familiar revolutionary-era cries of “work, freedom, and dignity” ringing out in the street before being smothered by tear gas.

The president should have made Tunisia’s profound economic travails his priority, but he instead remained focused on drawing up his new constitution. The response he delivered was to accuse local wholesalers of “speculating” by hoarding goods, and he ordered the interior minister to crack down on the sector. These attacks were counterproductive, as Tunisian traders ceased stockpiling to handle seasonal demand, which exacerbated shortages, such as a lack of bottled water supply over the summer. In any case, the blame lay closer to home: many scarce goods are subsidised and imported by the state, and traders regularly complain that these are held at port or on board transport ships waiting for the state’s payments to arrive.

Tunisia has deeper structural economic problems besides these immediate issues, such as a shadow economy estimated to make up 53 per cent of GDP in 2021. But the country’s most recent spiral is directly driven by the combination of a lack of foreign exchange and a private sector that is unable to foster growth.

The IMF arrived at similar conclusions. It offered a sorely needed cash injection in exchange for reforms to redress Tunisia’s current account deficit, which in December 2022 stood at 8.6 per cent of GDP. This includes controversial reforms to reduce government spending, such as cutting the wage bill and replacing subsidies with direct transfers to vulnerable constituencies, as well as measures that target the private sector, such as reforming state-owned enterprises, implementing ease of business reforms, investing in renewables, and increasing transparency. The demands are contested and controversial within Tunisian society and expert opinion.

Nevertheless, the principal problem facing Saied is a lack of conviction among key international partners that he will follow through on such a programme. The IMF demand
confidence measures

to assure itself that the political will and capacity exists for four years of difficult reforms. A process to discuss reforms was already under way with the IMF before Saied's *autogolpe*. But, since he seized power, those working on the IMF deal often lament the president's inability to commit despite there being no other obvious way forward for the country. They also regret his predilection for relying on shallow, unsubstantiated conspiracy theories about 'reclaiming' Tunisian money.[5] Saied has failed to make any public statement in favour of proceeding with the deal. He has prevaricated, apparently agreeing to it one day, then attacking the IMF as a predator the next. The president has suggested that his rich friends (read: Gulf Arab states) would bail him out instead.

This series of unfortunate events is typical of Saied's reliance on emotion when governing; whole swathes of vital public policy, such as economic reform, are going unaddressed. His governance style is typified by indecision and equivocation, followed by an inevitable delegation to his prime minister, likely to maintain plausible deniability. An agreement with the IMF is now ready for political sign-off, but Saied's unwillingness to give a firm commitment to the reform programme is preventing Tunisia from receiving the loan.

Saied is not wholly estranged from the notion of building coalitions to get things done. Last year he entered into talks with the trade unions and business organisations, which culminated in an agreement made on 12 August 2022 for a "social contract" to underpin reforms and IMF negotiations. On 14 September, an agreement with the UGTT to set public sector wage rises suggested this approach was bearing fruit. But just a few weeks later the relationship broke down. The government was reported to have presented these limited agreements as a comprehensive deal, and on 16 October the agreement with the IMF was announced. But UGTT secretary-general Nouredine Taboubi then publicly threatened strike action, arguing that several key issues remained unresolved.

Relations have only deteriorated since that time. Taboubi took a strong position against December's parliamentary election, branding the president a threat to democracy. (Previously Taboubi had been indifferent to, if not supportive of, the president's political programme.) By late December, Saied had passed the 2023 finance law by decree, which contained key provisions for enacting IMF reforms to raise Tunisia's tax base and reduce the budget deficit. But rather than reassure the IMF, the lack of a broader political commitment, and the decree's antagonistic use against key economic stakeholders, mean international confidence in Tunisia's capacity to implement these reforms remains weak. Meanwhile, Saied's battle with the UGTT is far from over, and further days of strikes have since followed to protest against "the government's marginalisation of public companies" in the IMF deal. The IMF board is yet to even schedule a vote to release the funds.

There is also a serious question of broader foreign support – or, rather, a lack thereof. The IMF will only provide around \$1.9 billion and it expects others to fill the gap. While a coalition of Gulf Cooperation Council states was initially expected to do this, they appear to have stepped back.[6] All this puts the ball firmly in Europeans’ court to satisfy that key condition of the deal. Yet, during this period the country’s economic troubles have caused its credit rating to slide. Concretely, if Tunisia drops to the lowest credit rating, internal regulations mean many EU member states will be unable to release further loans. This situation, combined with the general difficulty of working with the president, is already rewiring support frameworks from the US. If left unchecked, financial aid for Tunisia will continue to move out of development assistance and into humanitarian aid. This is a structural change with ramifications for how much Tunisia can get (given numerous other cases of countries in need around the world) and how that money is delivered.

As Tunisia’s nearest major power, it falls to the EU to support the Tunisian people in their current moment of need. The bloc should begin to put the structures in place to help the country’s economy and society – for however long the turbulent period of Saied’s rule lasts.

European angst and interest

The EU is deeply invested in the democratisation of Tunisia. The country has received €1.9 billion in grants and a further €800m in loans from the EU since 2011, making it the leading recipient of EU support per capita anywhere in the world.

This investment was a clear demonstration of European values in action and represented a bid to create a precedent for others in Tunisia’s region to follow – a model of a positive transition. Moreover, it was part of a concerted if not entirely conscious effort to extend European influence across the Mediterranean in the hope of creating a compatible bureaucratic and economic environment that could easily interface with the EU’s single market. As such, Tunisia quickly received privileged partnership status, was expedited towards a free trade agreement with the EU, and concluded various partnerships with different institutions providing ‘more for more’ technical and financial assistance. But ultimately these efforts proved largely ineffective in the face of Tunisia’s internal instability and Europeans’ inability to engage with the drivers of the country’s stagnation.

Most recently, Europeans have been notable for their relative absence from the dramas provoked by Saied since he seized power. No senior European official even visited Tunisia until months after the coup. In contrast to this, the US responded forcefully to Saied’s attack on democracy. A Congressional delegation travelled to Tunisia in September 2021 and

Washington quickly and repeatedly issued statements whose strength contrasted with Europeans' reticence and ambivalence. The US worked behind the scenes to encourage Saied to change tack and sought to marshal multilateral pressure for the country to return to its previous constitution. But now the US is contemplating disengaging from Tunisia and will likely do so unless Europeans make clear how important the country is for them and offer their own contribution.[7]

As usual, Europeans' differing positions have limited their effectiveness. Northern EU member states do not generally regard Tunisia as a foreign policy priority, while southern member states until recently remained quietly supportive of Saied, deferring to the impression of his popularity. Many were secretly hopeful that this strongman could stabilise the scene and help them secure key interests, be they economic, political, or relating to migration.[8]

The European Parliament has been more vocal in calling to protect Tunisia's democracy – but to the point of being counterproductive, with one MEP derogatorily calling Saied “autistic” at the foreign affairs committee. However, as the situation inside Tunisia worsened, and the president's role in fomenting unrest and driving economic ruin became clear, a common chorus of concern has grown, which Europeans have been working – again, quietly – to address. EU member states have provided hundreds of millions of euros in budget assistance to support Tunisia's economy, while working via institutions such as the Council of Europe's Venice Commission to push for higher democratic standards.

Despite Europeans' relatively muted response, Saied has attacked Europeans as meddlers who are violating Tunisian sovereignty. This is a populist ploy that finds some resonance among ordinary Tunisians and to which Europeans remain sensitive, keen to avoid such accusations, unlike the US, which publicly pushed back on that charge. He also courts China and Russia as potential replacement partners.

Nevertheless, the web of interests between Tunisia and Europe creates shared imperatives that bind them together. For example, the crudest connector between Tunisia and Europe is the rapidly growing number of irregular migrants crossing from Tunisia either over the Mediterranean through Italy or via the Balkans. Despite assurances to Italy, Saied has failed to arrest this trend. Between January and September 2022, 13,700 Tunisians reached the Italian coast – an 18 per cent year-on-year rise. This is even with Tunisia's navy intercepting a further 23,217 would-be migrants. Italy's right-wing government has made migration a key foreign policy priority, which has likely dissuaded it from taking a firmer stance against Tunisia's undemocratic slide. Italy has signed an enhanced deal with neighbouring Libya and it offered to facilitate greater legal migration to incentivise a reduction of irregular routes during a recent ministerial-level trip

to Tunis. The EU has also stepped in to help close the Balkans route by pressing Serbia to end visa-free travel for Tunisians. The drivers for migration from Tunisia are many and varied, but the country's crushingly depressing jobs market and economic situation mean many young Tunisians continue to leave.

For Europeans, Tunisia's stability and economic growth are key medium- and long-term interests if they are to resolve the current migration crisis and eventually move to a position where both Tunisians and capital begin to head back.

European interests also extend to critical issues of security and the question of regional stability.

A prolonged period of strife in Tunisia creates avenues for regional powers to influence or co-opt local actors, turning the country into a new arena of competition. The strongly rumoured role of Egypt in facilitating Saied's autogolpe is an example of this. The influence of Egypt's president, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, over Saied could herald the emergence of a Libya-style dynamic of regional powers destructively influencing local political actors. It could cause friction with neighbouring Algeria and Libya and result in Egypt's geopolitical rivals looking for political allies of their own within Tunisia.

Tunisia has also been a major exporter of foreign fighters to jihadist movements across the Middle East and North Africa. There is therefore worrying potential for Tunisia's more extreme domestic political camps and groups to attempt to co-opt any prolonged anti-Saied struggle. After 2011, these groups fell out with the Islamic democratic party Ennahda, which allied with elements of the former regime. They lambasted Ennahda's embrace of consensus politics. Such movements are deeply rooted in Tunisia's south, and they feel vindicated by the Saied regime's persecution of Ennahda. Any drawn-out fight between state security services and the population in Tunisia's southern and eastern regions could turn into a struggle involving extremist actors or returning jihadists, who would seek to cast themselves in an existential battle with an oppressive state.

A highly immediate topic of short-term strategic interest for the EU is one that verges on being a matter of national security: the preservation of the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline's export of natural gas from Algeria to Italy via Tunisia. Political instability in Tunisia or poor relations with the EU could put the pipeline's smooth operation at risk. With a capacity of 33.5 billion cubic metres, it is a core component of European attempts to diversify their gas supplies following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is also vital to fulfilling EU hopes for Algeria to increase gas sales to Europe over the coming years. Tunisia's geographical proximity to Italy also makes it a potential site for green energy planning, for example to convert

the heat of Tunisia's desert into electricity that can be exported to Europe.

Indeed, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its knock-on effects have re-energised European conversations about 'nearshoring' key industries and manufacturing more generally. While countries such as Turkey and Morocco are the primary regional beneficiaries thus far, Tunisia has extraordinary potential to become a key node in the EU's evolving network of global relationships. The country's geographical location, young population – many of whom possess higher education qualifications in key sectors such as IT – and its workforce's familiarity with European standards make it an appealing partner. Tunisia's recent trade agreement with the United Kingdom also enhances its relevance as a hub to serve EU and UK markets. Political instability in Tunisia and bureaucratic incoherence, both exacerbated by Saied, undermine the delivery on such hopes, but the country's immense potential remains.

Crucially, the geopolitical spillover from Russia's war in Ukraine has heightened the contest between external powers and intensified European concerns over Russian activities in North Africa. While Russia's Wagner Group is long since entrenched in Libya, which it uses as a launchpad for activities in sub-Saharan Africa, rumours are rife that Russia's embassy in Tunisia has been recently upgraded into a regional headquarters for the GRU – Russia's main intelligence directorate. Since Saied's takeover, Russian diplomacy has been busy strengthening ties with the Tunisian authorities. [9] Russia also has longstanding warm relations with Egypt and Algeria. Moscow therefore retains the capacity to influence developments in Tunisia through multiple means.

Holding their geopolitical own in this context is not an impossible task for Europeans. Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine and clumsy efforts to justify itself in multilateral forums is harming its reputation. This is most significant in Algeria, which is now looking to reduce its military dependence on Russia and scope out potential new alliances. [10] Efforts to stabilise Tunisia and its economy could be the mutual interest upon which the EU and Algeria can begin building a better relationship, with the potential for further joint activities.

Moreover, while Saied's threats of replacing Europe with China or Russia are fanciful – as neither would be willing to take on Tunisia's economic burden – rival powers will watch closely what the EU does in its southern neighbourhood and how successful it is at projecting its influence there. As such, Europeans' reputation and protection of their own interests are tightly bound up with Tunisia's stability and transition, especially given their deep investment over the past decade.

As well as working closely with the US, Europeans will be most successful in this endeavour if

they also seek to work with other partners to support Tunisia. Since Saied's *autogolpe*, nearby powers such as Egypt and Gulf Arab states saw Saied as their final victory against the Arab uprisings' promise of democratisation. Broadly speaking, autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa are supporting Saied, while the EU and US, either more quietly or more loudly, are pressing for a return to democratic standards. Despite this, working with key regional players to halt Tunisia's slide remains an opportunity for Europeans to improve their broader portfolio of relationships. Even regional autocracies are invested in Tunisian stability, fearing potential contagion should Tunisia continue to deteriorate. Moreover, Gulf Arab states increasingly posture as regional leaders: helping to diplomatically manage a case like Tunisia's presents the perfect platform for them to substantiate these claims to regional populations and the wider world.

There are distinct strengths for both Tunisians and Europeans to draw on as they consider how to put the country back on the path to democracy. Despite its problems, Tunisia has been a factor of stability in its region, serving as an exemplar of consensus politics, democratic transitions, and the incorporation of Islamists into democratic procedures. Over the last decade it has also absorbed thousands of Libyan migrants and nimbly navigated the complexities of North African interstate politics to maintain good relations with all other countries in the region (unlike, for instance, the rivalries that exist between Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria). This is even more significant in today's particularly fraught wider geopolitical environment. Amid this turbulence, the EU's early vision for Tunisia's future as a democratic and economically developed partner state remains more relevant than ever before. Europeans must hold to that vision as they devise fresh ways to help stabilise the country.

Recommendations

Saied's rule is inflicting deep damage on Tunisia's social stability, economic prospects, and democratic freedoms and culture. He appears unable to set strategy or take decisions that measure up to the crisis the country is undergoing. The president is exacerbating matters by focusing his attention on silencing critics and eroding democratic freedoms, and he is failing to rise to the occasion on the international stage by providing confidence in his leadership.

Saied is forgoing major opportunities to work closely with the EU and its member states to improve prospects for ordinary Tunisians and help the country thrive and prosper even in the current difficult geopolitical environment. Above all, he is certain to tumble as the gathering winds swirl. This is disconcerting for an EU scrambling to identify what it can do to maintain stability in Tunisia. But, given Saied's stubbornness and the difficulties of engaging with him, Europeans must expect the protests to increase, the economy to worsen, and Saied to grow

more repressive. During this time, they can prepare for the endgame.

To do so, the EU, its member states, and other Europeans should: build a ‘coalition of the concerned,’ whose goal is work with partners in Tunisia to minimise the pain of the president’s inevitable exit; and prioritise protecting the institutions, civil society, and other elements Tunisia will require to recover.

Rally a ‘coalition of the concerned’

As Saied enters his third act with the political system rewrought, deep in battles with the judiciary and civil society, and ensconced in an ever-shrinking circle of loyalists, Europeans will need to start identifying allies who can help influence the president and soften the eventual crash. This includes other powers in the region, the US, and Tunisia’s security services. It must also include communicating directly with Tunisians in new and accessible ways.

Forge regional partnerships

Saied’s two closest regional partners are Sisi and Algerian president Abdelmajid Tebboune. He also maintains close relations with the leaders of Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While the character of these regimes means the scope of any potential partnership between them and the EU is limited – for example, none will be enthusiastic about the prospect of greater democratisation – they could all exert influence over Saied. Algeria has a shared interest in Tunisian stability and has already acted in recent times to try to ensure calm in the country. The EU should encourage the Gulf states to assume a constructive stabilising role and substantiate their pretensions of being regional leaders.

Europeans should work with these partners to try to temper Saied’s worst instincts at key moments, crafting and maintaining open communication channels in preparation for the situation’s further deterioration. Alongside this, they could work together to identify specific joint projects. For example, the Gulf states could help keep Tunisia afloat today in exchange for the EU later taking on a larger financial burden in contributing to the eventual IMF reform package. Algeria could leverage its good relations with a diverse range of Tunisian institutions, politicians, and unions to help improve relations between Saied and others so they can advance an economic reform plan. Tunisia should also more generally be a topic in senior-level discussions with these countries, with which Europeans could scope out the boundaries of an effective working relationship to help stabilise Tunisia over the coming months.

Strengthen cooperation with the US

Alongside this, Europeans should work on devising a common policy with the US to help preserve Tunisia's peace and democratic identity in a more holistic manner. The US often acts as the 'bad cop,' which allows Europeans more space to manoeuvre, but Europeans cannot leave Washington to do everything. Given divisions within the EU, European reluctance to challenge Saied, and potential US disengagement from Tunisia, Europeans must make clear how important the country is for them and scope out a joint strategy. The core of this shared approach should be to assiduously lobby Saied on key issues such as reconstituting judicial independence. This would involve the identified issues being a priority on the agenda of every meeting between Saied or his staff and counterparts from the US, the EU, key member states, and relevant regional partners. The US and Europeans should use these opportunities to make clear what standards they expect Tunisia to uphold and warn that violations will only make things harder for the president – for example, were partners such as the IMF to lose confidence in the Tunisian state. In the early days of Saied's autocracy, the US, Europeans, and Algeria successfully worked together by using this approach to persuade the president to announce a government and set out a roadmap. Europeans should intimate that a failure to do so will mean Tunisia makes itself ineligible for lucrative EU partnership programmes.

Work with the Tunisian security services

The US remains a major funder of Tunisia's military, while the EU and member states have broad programmatic relations with different Tunisian security services, including through NATO. These are key sources of leverage that Europeans should use to try to improve the present situation and plan for a successful transition. This is especially important given that the security services are playing a crucial role in facilitating Saied's crackdown and are the last Tunisian institution with any influence over him. Europeans and Americans should also immediately activate relationships across Tunisia's interior ministry to encourage adherence to policing standards. This could help ensure heavy-handed policing does not cause anti-Saied protests to become national riots.

The US and Europeans should work more closely with the Tunisian military to influence Saied to refrain from moves that generate instability, especially given that the president's last remaining confidant appears to be the chief of military intelligence. This will be crucial as public opinion likely continues to shift against Saied, with the risk that he lashes out. The US and Europeans should start planning now to press the military to refrain from either performing a coup or continuing to double down behind Saied even when his position

becomes untenable. Instead, they should attempt to incentivise leading security actors to maintain order and provide space for Tunisia's civil society to plan a peaceful transition to new elections. This can be done through a combination of: the stick of sanctions and travel bans, including under Magnitsky Act measures for their command responsibility in any egregious human rights violations; and the carrot of maintaining European funding, and offering closer partnerships in reward for responsible behaviour during this difficult period.

Enhance strategic communications with the Tunisian public

Europeans' colonial history, and other issues such as the treatment of migrants in Europe, make them an easy target for Saied when he wants to distract Tunisians from his failings. But Europeans have also made the president's job easy for him by failing to effectively communicate their activities to the broader public. To address this, the EU delegation to Tunisia, member state embassies, and occasionally even senior officials from the most involved states such as France, Italy, and Spain should invest more in social media communications and engagements with Tunisian media. This should entail taking on Saied's messaging around neocolonialism by setting out the ways in which the EU wishes to help Tunisia become an economically developed partner. Europeans should make clear too that they are working hard to keep Tunisia's economy afloat. These channels should share information about European support in accessible and attractive ways.

Such output should differ from more traditional forms of diplomatic communication. Europeans should use these established means to convey the ways in which Saied's misgovernance is damaging the economy. They should ensure that these focus as clinically as possible on the obstacles that prevent the EU providing further economic and programmatic support – that is, those obstacles created by the president's actions, such as failing to agree to the IMF deal and rolling back judicial independence. Ensuring all this is in the public domain will help Tunisian civil society target their advocacy while also avoiding any suggestion of such messaging being a personal attack on the president.

Effective public relations should be a cornerstone of European efforts to get the Tunisian public on side, limit Saied's space to deflect, and make arguments for public consumption about major issues such as the need for financial and economic stability. Creating such a platform and strategy for effective communications is an invaluable 'soft power' tool that will strengthen other European policies.

Push back against political arrests

The EU and member states can advertise to the Tunisian people that they are on their side,

and on the side of Tunisian democracy, by pushing back hard and visibly against Saied's arrest campaign. They can do this by issuing public criticisms as well as exerting private pressure in bilateral meetings with Saied and his staff. Strong legal grounds exist to advocate for their release, and this is especially urgent given strong allegations of mistreatment of prisoners, with some detainees even going on hunger strike. Proceedings are taking place outside the correct legal system, in military courts which should have no jurisdiction over the 'crimes' of which the arrested individuals are accused. Some have even been charged with things that are nowhere defined as crimes, such as meeting with European diplomats. A vocal EU approach will also help empower human rights organisations to work with victims towards establishing accountability measures such as travel bans and sanctions (as some victims' families are already doing) or even collecting evidence of torture and other human rights abuses to allow relevant European prosecutors to file indictments under universal jurisdiction. This may, in turn, make it harder for Saied to act this way and incentivise the security services and judicial personnel executing his orders to instead begin releasing prisoners.

Help Tunisians prepare for the next transition

Europeans should work to build 'scaffolding' that ensures Tunisians are able to govern the country following Saied's crash. They can undertake this vital work in several ways.

Provide economic life support

Tunisia requires a reform plan and the cash infusion promised by the IMF deal, but this is highly unlikely while Saied remains in power. So in the immediate term Europeans should try to 'keep the lights on,' aware that a collapse in Tunisia's economy, complete with a food crisis and other missing imports, could lead to yet more domestic unrest. Such a deterioration could contribute to wider instability in the region and cause more migrants to head to Europe. While some argue that providing economic support to Tunisia only empowers Saied, not doing so risks creating a humanitarian disaster. Saied is not going to change his ways, and so Europeans may as well do what good they can, where they can.

In pursuit of this, they should continue to provide direct budget support to ensure that vital imports can continue to enter the country. Ideally, this assistance would be delivered as administrative development support – rather than humanitarian aid directly to communities – to prevent existing systems of government procurement and distribution from breaking down. Alongside this, European officials should engage with credit agencies to ascertain exactly what would cause them to downgrade Tunisia again, so they can try to prevent such a

development while lobbying the agencies for a stay of execution. Europeans can then work with institutions such as the IMF or the Paris Club to identify emergency measures to maintain cash flows and stop a default that would damage future credit. Such measures could include creative debt restructuring or debt relief mechanisms such as substituting some of the debt for development programmes, something which was unsuccessfully trialled by France a few years ago but could still work if its implementation flaws are ironed out. [11] Alternatively, European governments could donate some of their special drawing rights with the IMF to allow Tunisia's government debt-free access to foreign currencies that they need to pay for imports. This could be a novel approach to budget support that is relatively cost-efficient for Europeans, given that they are highly unlikely to need these special drawing rights for themselves.

Europeans should actively communicate these economic support measures to Tunisians to reinforce the message that their president is failing them but Europe is supporting them. Europeans should also frame credit protection mechanisms as a short-term necessity. This is to try to protect Tunisia's capacity to recover and reform (in addition to the IMF package) once it regains political stability.

Assist the civil service

Europeans should focus on helping Tunisian policymakers improve their policy design and implementation skills and experience. This could pay economic dividends by helping the state bureaucracy become more efficient and thereby improve prospects for Tunisian businesses to flourish.

Supporting the civil service would involve instigating partnership-building and twinning between different levels of the Tunisian state, from ministries to municipalities. The EU can do this through its neighbourhood policy as well as through EU-aligned programmes and initiatives such as the European Committee of the Regions, which has instituted twinning programmes to help local governments in other developing countries such as Libya. Focusing on technocratic issues such as institutional organisation and project management can help Europeans bolster the Tunisian state's effectiveness while reducing the chances that such help will be attacked as neocolonial meddling.

Support civil society

Europeans should focus on protecting the work of Tunisian civil society while channelling funding into key areas needed to buttress the state's ability to function and create policy. The EU should therefore direct funding towards supporting domestic accountability monitors,

such as the media and other organisations. It should couple this with the diplomatic efforts outlined above to push back against the political persecution of civil society.

Another priority for funding support should be civil society organisations that focus on policy and advocacy. The EU should incentivise these organisations to study their own experiences to find examples of where they have successfully made change that can inspire others.

Meanwhile, Europeans could encourage Tunisian authorities to bridge divides between the civil service and civil society, for example by encouraging Tunisian institutions to create processes and joint task forces that provide official mechanisms for civil society to feed into policy creation. In this way Europeans could help create structures to defend civic space amid tightening authoritarianism. Promoting this joint approach will ensure Europeans are not engaging in a form of external interference in sovereign affairs, nor are seen to be doing so. Moreover, it helps ensure Tunisia is building the more functional governance it needs.

Finally, when engaging with members of the political opposition, Europeans should remind them that their ratings remain lower than Saied's, and that their future depends on aligning with civil society. They should advise political interlocutors to refocus on the economic, governance, and anti-corruption reforms the population want. Encouraging the political elite to work on credible visions for redressing the economy, combatting police brutality, and tackling corruption will help develop a relevant and engaged political opposition rather than the current group of preachers and their choir.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Tunisia is in a desperate situation. Saied took absolute control of the country a year and a half ago, and now appears to be steering the country towards the rocks. Despite impressions of his popularity as a strongman, his indecisive – yet divisive – governing style is on course to create a period of roiling instability. The president appears set to assault an ever-growing group of dissenters and go to war with the broader Tunisian establishment. The country's economy is also failing and threatens to catalyse existing discontent and widen social and political fractures.

Europeans have a series of strong interests not only in preventing Tunisia from enduring deeper social, political, and economic instability, but also in the country become a meaningful ally by building stronger trade and people-to-people relationships across the Mediterranean. The constraints of Europeans' current position are clear. Not only is Saied stubbornly difficult to influence, but European stock among Tunisians is low, and traditional allies are embattled or behind bars. More troublingly, Tunisia's current political instability means that, despite the urgency of the moment, it is incapable of delivering on the

commitments it has made to the IMF and is unable to embed policy of any complexity, such as significant economic reforms.

Moreover, Saied remains more popular than his political opponents, which means this story has some way still to run. But ultimately the president's departure – or overthrow – is a question of when, not if. Members of the military and internal security apparatus, who believed Saied would restore decisive command and order to Tunisia, are the president's last remaining backers. But his violent demands are straining security services' relations with those they are supposed to protect. This trajectory will not satisfy ordinary Tunisians' democratic desires. Saied's parting legacy to the country will be a dysfunctional political system that incentivises authoritarian autocracy. All this means that the eventual transfer of power deserves far more thought than it is currently receiving by either European or Tunisian policymakers.

Europeans should therefore avoid getting entangled in Tunisia's day-to-day crises and work in a long-term way to try to increase their influence over Saied and lessen the impact of future ructions. This means building broad coalitions and partnerships to help manage Tunisia, maintaining economic assistance to the country, helping support the political opposition, and developing the institutional capacity and civil society base Tunisia will need to govern once the president is gone.

With these foundations in place, Europeans will be better placed to deal with either of two eventualities. Firstly, a scenario in which Saied steps back to allow his government to implement a more constructive policy platform – in which case civil servants and civil society will be able to credibly embark on the IMF reform plan and develop complementary strategies for economic growth. Secondly, in a scenario in which Saied remains a destabilising force whose position eventually becomes untenable, Europeans will possess strong relationships beyond his camp and Tunisians will have the capacity to navigate any transition.

Years of internal division in the EU, myopia over issues such as migration, and misdirected policymaking have left Europeans flatfooted in their response to Tunisia's sudden deterioration. Just as the country was once the symbolic vanguard of the EU's post-Arab uprisings democratisation drive, now the bloc has the chance to use its approach to Tunisia to show it can develop more considered and strategic foreign policy. By strengthening partnerships in Tunisia and across the region, Europeans can devise ways to help Tunisia and stabilise the country.

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[1] Author's conversations with Tunisian citizens, NGO workers, and diplomats working on Tunisia since Saied's election as president and again since the *autogolpe*.

[2] Author's conversations with Tunisian citizens, NGO workers, and diplomats working on Tunisia since Saied's election as president and again since the *autogolpe*.

[3] This statement is based on the author's conversations with figures who worked or were open to working with Saied and his supporters.

[4] Author's conversations with Tunisian citizens, NGO workers, and diplomats working on Tunisia since Saied's election as president and again since the *autogolpe*.

[5] Author's conversation with diplomats and officials working on the Tunisia-IMF deal since the *autogolpe*.

[6] Author's interview with an individual close to the loan negotiations, January 2023.

[7] Author's conversations with US officials and experts on US foreign policy, February 2023.

[8] Author's conversations with Tunisian citizens, NGO workers, and diplomats working on Tunisia since Saied's election as president and again since the *autogolpe*.

[9] Author's conversations with diplomats working on Tunisia during 2022.

[10] Author's conversations with diplomats working on Algeria and Algerian foreign policy experts during 2022.

[11] Author's conversations in 2022 with Tunisian officials and French diplomats involved in the project.

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