

Written evidence submitted by the Center for the Study of Islam & Democracy (MENA0040)

Executive Summary

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Who is CSID?

1. I hereby submit this evidence as the President of the Center for the Study of Islam & Democracy (CSID), a non-profit organization, based in Washington DC, dedicated to studying Islamic and democratic political thought and merging them into a modern Islamic democratic discourse. The organization was founded in March 1999 by a diverse group of academicians, professionals, and activists—both Muslim and non-Muslim—from around the USA who agree on the need for the study of and dissemination of reliable information on this complex topic. There is no narrow ideological or sectarian litmus test for involvement in CSID—the organization has no agenda other than the production and dissemination of rigorous research into Islam and democracy—but its members are united in the conviction that this subject has been widely misunderstood both in the West and the Muslim world, and that this fact has caused much discord among Muslims and continues to hamper attempts at cross-cultural dialogue today.

UK-Tunisia Relations - Pre-Revolution

2. A [briefing](#) on British foreign policy and the 'Arab Spring' noted that "prior to the revolution, the UK's Embassy in Tunisia was one of the smallest in the region and the FCO described the UK's bilateral relationship with Tunisia as "limited", attributing this mainly "to the closed nature of the Ben Ali regime but added that the presence in the UK of Rached Ghannouchi, and the UK's "policy of contact with opposition parties and human rights groups in Tunisia" also "triggered negative reactions" from the Tunisian government. Despite this, the FCO said that "access to decision-makers on trade and investment issues was generally good."
3. The [Euro-Mediterranean Agreement of 30 March 1998](#), establishing an association between the European Community and its Member States, then including the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on the one part, and the Republic of Tunisia, on the other part, states in its Article 2 that "the relations between the Parties, as well as all the provisions of this Agreement, are based on respect for the democratic principles and human rights which inspire their internal

and international policies and which constitute an essential element of the Agreement.” The very basis for this Agreement has been violated since President Saied’s 25 July 2021 self-coup.

Consolidating democracy after the 2011 Revolution: Political players set the following priorities in order to help consolidate democracy in Tunisia:

4. **Reforming state institutions to strengthen the rule of law** – by developing and reforming the security sector and guaranteeing an independent judiciary, including through the establishment of the Supreme Judicial Council (CSM), the Superior Independent Instance for Elections (ISIE), the Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Commission (INLUCC) and the Anti-Torture Commission. All these State bodies were either dissolved or their elected members were dismissed and replaced by members chosen by Mr Saied after his July 2021 coup.
5. **Security** – Combatting extremism and terrorism through a multi-layered approach, including strengthening the capacities of the security sector, implementing the anti-terrorism law, improving regional cooperation, stimulating investment and development projects in Tunisia’s marginalized interior regions and engaging youth through improved youth support services. However, the latest deadly attack that took place in Djerba at the biggest synagogue in the country, during the yearly Jewish pilgrimage, was not described by the Tunisian [Government as a terrorist attack, thus downplaying its significance](#), even though the assailant was a police officer. It was the very first time a terrorist attack was planned from within the State apparatus, which shows the danger Mr Saied’s brings to Tunisia.
6. **Transitional justice** – the need to address past violations and ensure they are not repeated is a vital part of the democratic transition. Established a system of transitional justice based on truth and reconciliation. A National Commission on Truth and Dignity, appointed by parliament, helped Tunisians to reveal the truth of past violations and turn the page on decades of human rights abuses that took place during the past dictatorship, in order to establish a new culture of respect for human rights and the rule of law.
7. **Decentralization** – the 2014 Tunisian Constitution introduced an entire chapter on local governance, seeking to make government closer and more accessible to the ordinary citizen. Decentralization provides a huge opportunity for Tunisia to move from its model of opaque and highly centralized government to more transparent, participatory, and open governance that engages and includes the citizens in decisions that affect their lives. The first free and fair municipal elections took place in 2018 and were applauded by the whole world, as seen as a key democratic gain. But in March 2023, Mr Saied unlawfully [dissolved these elected councils](#). This has left cities in a vacuum, which for instance justifies the breakdown in local governance, as Mr Saied also sacked numerous regional Governors without any justification.
8. **Human rights** – Freedom and dignity have been at the forefront of the 2011 Jasmine Revolution’s popular demands. While the decade following the revolution has allowed for civil society to flourish, for rights and freedoms to be respected, as witnessed by observers, the situation has considerably worsened since July 2021. Indeed, numerous rights organisations’ reports demonstrate the lack of rights. Mr Saied has shown dangerous populism over the last years, as he is continuing to target his critics. His populism is based on always finding an enemy and directing hate and blame to them, moving from one group to the next: parliament, political parties, politicians, businesspeople, Blacks migrants, foreigners, and now Jews, when he [said](#) on 18th September 2023 that “[the storm that struck Derna in Libya was named after the Hebrew Prophet Daniel, which translates a Zionist influence.](#)” This [declaration](#) was criticized by many, across the world and in Tunisia, the country having always been a land where Jews and non-Jews lived in peace. In 2018, the Muslim democratic Ennahdha party [nominated Simon Slama, a Jewish candidate](#) on their 2018 municipal election lists, and in 2019, most of the political class and population supported the nomination of Jewish minister René Trabelsi. From 2nd July 2023, the

Tunisian authorities have been forcibly removing hundreds of Sub-Saharan migrants from their homes and deporting them to the desert in buffer zones at the border with Libya and Algeria, leaving them in territories which citizens, [journalists](#) and civil society organizations cannot access. At least [27 have died](#) in the desert. Tunisia, often seen as a model for democracy in the Arab world, in 2018 became the first country in the MENA region to [criminalise racial discrimination](#).

Arrests and political suppression

9. After the coup perpetrated by Mr Saied on 25th July 2021, in complete contravention of the 2014 Tunisian Constitution that was applauded by the whole world for being progressive, and after his illegal use of Article 80 of this Constitution, Tunisia has lived an erosion of democratic and participative life, public and personal liberties, attacks on the Judiciary and the dissolution of democratic State institutions and replacing of their elected members with loyalist to Mr Saied.
10. Mr Saied is determined to use the recently purged judiciary - which he has successfully intimidated and brought to heel - against his critics. He uses [genocidal language](#) to refer to his political opponents, describing them as "cancerous cells that can only be eliminated by chemical methods". His supporters do the same on social networks and in the media, with most of the state-controlled public media relaying these remarks.
11. In the last few months, Tunisia is bearing witness to a wide scale crackdown against the President's critics. Since 11th February 2023, democracy defenders have appeared before judges, sometimes before military courts, while some have been detained without seeing a judge, sometimes with interrogations taking place while the defendants are in intensive care unit. Several protests took place in Tunis in response to President Saied's increasingly authoritarian rule, where thousands protested the crackdown on the opposition and critics.
12. Mr Ghannouchi is among over 40 of President Saied's prominent critics to have been [arrested](#) in the last year. The Tunisian authorities have come under sharp [criticism](#) from international rights groups in its use of the "judiciary as a tool of repression" to arrest prominent political critics and members of the Ennahdha Party in an attempt to "neutralize the country's largest political party".

Constant pressure, legal proceedings, hate speech and media campaigns against Mr Rached Ghannouchi

13. Rached Ghannouchi, a lifelong champion of moderation and [democracy](#) who turned 82 on the 22nd of June 2023, President of Tunisia's democratically elected Parliament and President of the largest political party, has been subjected to [repeated political harassment](#) by President Kais Saied. He has been summoned to appear before an investigating judge seventeen times since March 2022 on trumped-up charges. He was [arrested](#) on 17 April 2023.
14. The timing of this arrest, in the context of a wave of arrests of several other opposition leaders and activists from across the political spectrum, as well as journalists, judges, lawyers and trade unionists, is yet another example of the repression of dissent, following President Saied's failure to mobilize the population to participate in the elections he organized at the end of January 2023. Only a historically low 11% of voters took part in the elections, following calls for a boycott from the democratic opposition. With this witch-hunt, the president is seeking to break the momentum that the opposition has created and divert attention from the disastrous state of the country's economy, to which he has paid no attention since coming to power in 2019.
15. On 17 April 2023, 100 plain-clothes agents arrived at Mr Ghannouchi's home and [arrested](#) him ten minutes before the Ramadan fast was due to end. The Tunis police searched the property, taking away Mr Ghannouchi's personal papers, electronic devices and diary. Mr Ghannouchi was taken to an undisclosed location and denied access to a lawyer during questioning for 48 hours.

Over the first night, he was forced to sit on a chair and denied access to the toilet without closing the door. He was then questioned about "inciting statements" he allegedly made during a public demonstration at the headquarters of the Front de Salut National, which were distorted by the prosecution. On 18 April 2023, Mr Ghannouchi was taken before the judge, but refused to speak as his lawyers were not allowed access to the interrogation.

16. On Wednesday 19 April 2023, after a [nine-hour overnight questioning](#) and a seven-hour wait, an examining magistrate ordered the provisional detention of Rached Ghannouchi, the democratically elected President of the Tunisian Parliament and leader of the Ennahdha party. He has since been held in Mornaguia prison, in connection with a public statement made by Mr Ghannouchi, which was distorted by the prosecution.
17. On Monday 15th May 2023, a Tunisian judge [sentenced](#) Rached Ghannouchi to a year in prison and 1000 TND (£257) fine on baseless and politically-motivated charges of incitement. Mr Ghannouchi has been sentenced in relation to the "Taghout" (Tyranny) case, on charges that stem from a eulogy he gave last year for a member of the Ennahdha Party in which he stated the deceased "did not fear a ruler or tyrant, he only feared God". Earlier this month Mr Ghannouchi refused to appear before the judiciary, rejecting the fabricated political trial. A Tunisian judge sentenced Mr Ghannouchi in absentia, and without legal representation. Having been imprisoned since the 17th April 2023, the sentencing of 82-year old Mr Ghannouchi marks a major escalation in President Saied's authoritarian crackdown on political opponents. Mr Ghannouchi has been a primary target of political motivated charges, [facing](#) seventeen court hearings in the past year alone. Mr Ghannouchi is also accused of plotting against the state security, a charge that carry death penalty. His arrest and sentencing are yet another dangerous step towards increased political tension and instability.
18. Assembly Speaker Ghannouchi has expressed his insistence on a return to the constitutional path and has repeatedly called for a comprehensive national dialogue including all constitutional institutions and political parties, as well as social and national organizations. He has also been attacked by opponents of the democratic process outside his home, where they were holding a picket line. He has also been attacked by opponents of the democratic process outside his home, where they were holding a picket and insulting him ([details](#)). He is also subject to fierce media pressure affecting his person, his family, his biography and his work. He has been the subject of multiple campaigns of accusations that are not based on any legal or judicial facts.
19. Dozens of other public figures had expressed their support and called for his release on his 82nd birthday. The [Ennahdha party offices were shut down](#) since Mr Ghannouchi's arrest, without any legal justifications, in a goal to suppress freedom of [association](#). Rights organisations, as well as the United Nations, and several Governments, have condemned his arbitrary arrest and constant targeting.

Political arrest of critics

20. Tunisian authorities launched arrest campaigns targeting dozens of opposition figures and activists, including MPs, ministers, party leaders, journalists, judges, lawyers, and human rights defenders. They were charged with "conspiring against state security, inciting people to attack each other, money laundering, colluding with foreign countries, spreading fake news, and committing a heinous act against the head of state," but no evidence has been brought forward to prove the charges.
21. In addition to Mr Ghannouchi, those arrested include MP and Former Minister of Justice Nouredine Bhiri, Former Secretary-General of Tunisia's Social Democratic Tassarout Party Ghazi Chaouachi, Secretary-General of Al Joumhour (Republican) Party Issam Chebbi, Ennahdha Party MP Said Ferjani, Judge Bechir Akremi, former MP and former Prime Minister Ali Larayedh,

economist and independent political activist Khayam Turki, civil society activist Chaima Issa, political activist Ridha Belhaj, PDL Party President Abir Moussi, and many more.

22. In June 2023, more than [50 professors from law faculties in Tunisia signed a petition demanding the immediate release of all political prisoners and detainees of conscience](#) “who have been thrown into prison without just cause or fair trial,” as well as an end to the “wave of repression” in the country. The statement, signed by 52 experts in law and political science, emphasized that lawyers defending the detainees have confirmed that the files are empty, lacking any evidence of guilt. The signatories also highlighted that during the raid on the detainees’ homes, no weapons, ammunition, explosives, or other materials, equipment, or documents related to committing terrorist or non-terrorist crimes were found or confiscated. They criticized the delays in the investigation procedures, highlighting that elements of a fair trial are not available in these cases, including the presumption of innocence. Furthermore, they considered the decrees and orders issued based on exceptional measures, severe violations of the constitution and legality. Dozens of academics and public figures from several countries have also [signed a petition to call for the release of former minister and former Secretary General of the Tayyar \(left-wing\) party Ghazi Chaouachi](#), as well as all other political prisoners.
23. A key critic of Tunisia’s Kais Saied, President of the National Salvation Front Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, was called in for questioning over allegations of conspiracy against the state, for [declaring](#) the president was “criminalizing” all opposition. But he is not the only one who is being persecuted for his political stances. [Among them are](#):
24. Chaima Issa, civil society activist, poet, National Salvation Front leader and first female political prisoner since the Freedom and Dignity Revolution in 2011, as well as lawyer Lazhar Akremi, were [released](#) from jail on 13th July and put under house arrest, not being allowed to appear in public or leave the Tunisian territory. On 23rd June, the judge had [blocked the release](#) of Ms Issa, for undisclosed motives. Rights organizations have pointed out they should never have set foot in prison, and the investigation, for which other prisoners are detained for exercising their human rights, should be [dropped](#).
25. Ennahdha Party Vice President Nouredine Bhiri, who was jailed from December 2021 to March 2022 after he was abducted from his house by police officers and taken to an unknown location, was arrested again in February 2023. He was [hospitalised](#) and left in a critical condition last year following another abduction by Tunisian police after unfounded allegations of terrorism.
26. Jaouhar Ben M’barek, the prominent opposition figure and leader of the Citizens Against the Coup, was yet another person to be [arrested](#) at the end of February as part of the crackdown, which has been denounced by [EuroMed](#). On 25 September 2023, he entered an open hunger strike to protest against his and his co-detainees’ arbitrary detention.
27. Dr Sahbi Attig, former MP, was arrested at the airport on 6th June 2023 as he was traveling abroad to speak at an event. He was detained since then on politically motivated, fabricated charges. The [Euro-Mediterranean](#) Human Rights Monitor has called on Tunisia to free jailed politician Sahbi Attig, whose [health](#) has been [deteriorating](#) amid a continuing [hunger strike](#). He was in intensive care unit for a few weeks, in a coma. This has led to irreversible damage. The Tunisian authorities have been [using phones of detainees without their consent](#), using Mr Attig’s on 11th June. This had happened to Chaima Issa and Rached Ghannouchi before.
28. Judge and former General Prosecutor Bechir Akremi has been imprisoned since 12th February 2023 on farcical charges. To this day, no real accusations have been put forward. His arrest and subsequent torture were part of a systematic plan to control and undermine the independence of the judiciary in Tunisia. His detention was the object of a [letter by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges](#), Margaret Satterthwaite, to the Tunisian authorities, where she also

defended the case of the 57 judges who were arbitrarily and illegally dismissed by Mr Saied in June 2022, including Judge Akremi. She was supposed to visit the country in June, but the Tunisian authorities have [denied](#) her from doing so.

29. The family of Said Ferjani MP have reported the harrowing conditions he was living in [unlawful detention](#) including the lack of running water amid extremely high temperatures (over 50° Celsius), pest infestations, sharing one open toilet in an overcrowded cell with 105 other prisoners. He was also taken to hospital (in a prison van, not in an ambulance) because of the lack on [health care](#) in prison. Mr Ferjani hasn't had access to a doctor for his heart condition, and his latest meeting with his lawyer turned very short because the prison direction decided so. The prison also denied him from getting clothes that were bought for him. This happened after the African Court [ruled](#) on 31st August 2023 that the Tunisian State should ensure he and other prisoners should have access to the doctor and lawyer of their choice.
30. Ahlem Bousserwel, Secretary General of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, was [arrested](#) on 26th August. She was then released pending judgment.
31. Ahmed Mechergui, former MP and chief of staff of Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi, began a [hunger strike](#) on 9th June to protest against his arbitrary arrest and his detention conditions. He was arrested under the fabricated "conspiracy case" involving Rached Ghannouchi.
32. On 22nd August, Ghazi Chaouachi, Issam Chebbi, Khayam Turki, Ridha Belhaj, Jawher Ben Mbarek and Abdelhamid Jlassi, six of the dozens of political detainees were [transported](#) to court to be informed of the decision to extend their detention another 4 months. These detainees were transported in a 'torture van', as described by the detainees. Issam Chebbi was taken to hospital, after he fell inside the vehicle on his back. The judge decided not to meet the detainees but left the collective decision to extend their detention to his secretary, even though according to Tunisian law, this decision should be individual, and the judge should have listened to each prisoner. The decision was announced to them orally by the judge's secretary, and the written order of imprisonment was only sent to the prison, not to the lawyers. On 21st September, the Indictment Chamber [confirmed the extension of their detention](#). Mr Saied had warned the judges in February, saying "Anyone who allows himself to clear them will be their accomplice." One of them, Mr Chaouachi, has been [prevented from receiving books](#) since his arrest, on the order of the Justice Minister. They, also, risk death penalty.
33. Abdelkarim Harouni, Head of the Ennahdha Party's National Council (Shura), after having been [put](#) under an arbitrary [house arrest](#) for unknown reasons on 3rd September 2023, was [arrested](#) on farcical charges on 5th September, and taken to a detention centre, where his lawyers have been told there was no proof against him. Five days later, an investigating judge decided to [imprison](#) him until the end of the investigation, which can last up to 14 months. Former Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali was also [interrogated](#) in the same case, and was released after 7 hours.
34. International arrest warrants were [issued](#) by the Tunisian state against 12 persons, including political figures, business-people.

Attacks on the Judiciary

35. On the 30th August, the temporary judiciary council appointed by Mr Saied after he illegally dismantled the previously elected Supreme Judicial Council announced the 'Judiciary movement'; the first one since the 25th July 2021 coup. This was described as the most corrupt and politically biased movement since the revolution. Indeed, Mr Saied, according to the Tunisian Association of

Judges (TAJ) in its 5th September [statement](#), has systematically punished those who opposed his will to prosecute and jail opponents, while rewarding and promoting judges that were following his orders. This movement has even rewarded judges that had ongoing corruption cases but were loyal to the regime. Judge Afif Jaidi calls this the 'massacre of the judiciary', He also [says](#) "his colleagues were transferred "arbitrarily" and did not obtain their rights, indicating that there are some judges who are subjected to arbitrary procedures and suspension from work as a result of decisions issued by the Minister of Justice that "contradict" the guarantees of the independence of the judiciary." Judge Afif Jaidi also echoed the sentiment that has plagued the judiciary since the coup and arrest of Judge Béchir Akremi, that the regime wants judges to be terrified and be submissive.

36. The numbers indicate that the judicial movement affected 40 percent of the practising judges to be described as the most prominent movement in the history of judges in Tunisia, and included 13 presidents of a court of first instance out of 29, and the change of 16 public prosecutors, and 10 presidents of courts of appeal were moved out of a total of 16, and 10 public prosecutors were [replaced](#) -without justifications.
37. This attack on the independence of the Judiciary has led to many prominent lawyers and judges' retirement from their jobs, citing that the climate no longer supports justice. This also comes after 57 judges were [revoked](#) arbitrarily in June 2022.
38. In addition to the TAJ, the harassment of judges has also been denounced by several international figures and organizations, notably after the President of the Tunisian Association of Judges, Judge Hmedi, has been arbitrarily prosecuted. Indeed, the [International Commission of Jurists](#), as well as the [International Conference of Bars](#), the [UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers](#), and the [President of the International Association of Judges](#), have all issued statement in support to the rule of law in Tunisia.

Economic Situation

39. Amid Mr Saied's crackdown on critics including political opponents, media professionals, civil society activists and unionists, as well as on Sub-Saharan [migrants](#), the [economic situation](#) in Tunisia is increasingly desperate. The [annual inflation rate](#) in Tunisia soared for seventeen straight months to 10.4% in February 2023, with some food items such as chicken or fruits rising by over 20%, reaching the highest point since December 1984.
40. Unemployment has reached 15%, with one-third of university graduates and a higher share of young people unable to find work. Additionally, there have been [ongoing shortages](#) of everyday essentials including sugar, flour, pasta and yeast.
41. The President's comments have threatened an increasingly important deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which have [stalled](#) amid political tensions. The World Bank also [announced](#) on 6th March "pausing future work with Tunisia after statements by the country's president on migrants from African countries triggered racist harassment and violence."

The UK's current MENA policy

42. The UK has strong, historic bilateral ties in the MENA region, which are vital to UK prosperity and security. The UK Government is seeking to deepen these links to become one of the region's primary trade and investment partners and build support for its climate objectives. John Bew, the author of the Integrated Review, published an updated version of his work, which indicates that

the North Africa Region was a 'Third Priority' area, as classified as its 'wider neighborhood', being on the periphery of the Euro-Atlantic where developments have direct consequences for Europe.

43. In March 2021, the British Prime Minister presented to Parliament by command of Her Majesty, the [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), where he stated that "liberal democracy and free markets remain the best model for the social and economic advancement of humankind", and that "Protecting our people, our homeland and our democracy is the first duty of any government." PM Johnson then expressed the importance the UK gave to linking diplomacy and development, through the creation of the FCDO, to achieve greater impact.

UK-Tunisia relations - Economy

44. Against the backdrop of the ongoing socio-economic crisis that was enhanced after President Saied executed his power-grab on 25 July 2021, the [UK Government updated its Overseas Business Risk for Tunisia](#), which outlined that UK companies can receive support from the £2.5 billion that UK Export Finance (UKEF) has set aside for the Tunisian market. Despite the political, constitutional, legal, economic and social issues that emanated from the 2021 coup, UK companies continued to show strong interest in pursuing opportunities in sectors such as energy, ICT, education and financial and professional services. Imports and exports (though particularly the latter) have been a central component of the UK Government's trade policy as the country navigates Brexit, making the potential for overseas investment in growth regions such as MENA eminently desirable, given the right conditions.
45. In June 2022, Britain and Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding on British technical and financial support for the development of renewable energies in Tunisia, having been signed by Tunisian Minister of Industry, Mines and Energy, Neila Noura Gonji, and Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Minister of State for South and Central Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth of the United Kingdom during his visit. In his statement, Lord Ahmad said that "the United Kingdom now wants to be the largest foreign investor in the energy sector in Tunisia."
46. In October 2019, the UK and Tunisia signed a continuity agreement to ensure British businesses and consumers benefit from continued access to the Tunisian market after leaving the EU. It was signed by former British Ambassador to Tunisia, Louise De Sousa, and former Tunisian Ambassador to the UK, Nabil Ben Khedher.
47. In January 2020, the UK Government launched a new African Investment Summit as part of a wider effort to bring financial and economic support to the continent, whilst both countries continue to develop relations through the Tunisia-UK Trade and Investment Forum.
48. The UK's support has been continuous, particularly in the areas of security and economy. However, more support is needed from all our foreign allies. Indeed, the support of our partners is hugely important for Tunisia as we seek to bring back democracy, strengthen our economy, secure our borders, and help show that democracy can work in the region. It is firmly in our joint interests - the UK's, Europe's, and Tunisia's, to strengthen stability, consolidate our democratic experience and grow the Tunisian economy.

UK-Tunisia relations - Security

49. The success of Tunisia's democratic and economic transition is crucial to countering the poisonous narrative of extremist groups such as ISIS. It has been shown across our region how the absence of a state and of effective democratic governance can help ISIS spread and expand its networks, helping it to train fighters and launch attacks in other countries. A sustainable long-

term solution is to promote good governance, political and social inclusion and respect for human rights and pluralism as vital components of a strong and effective state in the Arab world, able to meet the many challenges of our global and regional context and the needs of its citizens. By showcasing how freedoms and tangible economic growth and security can be secured within a democratic framework, Tunisia can provide a viable antidote and counter-narrative to the extremist discourse.

50. In February 2022, following a meeting between the Tunisian Ministry of National Defence and UK Ambassador to Tunisia, Helen Winterton, greater Tunisian and UK military cooperation was announced. The Tunisian Ministry of Defence welcomed the British desire to raise the level of military cooperation between the two countries in areas of mutual interest, such as training, exchange of experiences, and peacekeeping missions.

UK-Tunisia relations - Governance and Human Rights

51. Following President Saïed's dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council in 2022, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon [raised](#) the issue of checks and balances with Tunisian Foreign Minister Jerandi, emphasizing the need for an independent Judiciary to ensure a functioning democracy.
52. On 3 February 2022, [BGIPU hosted a virtual briefing with the British Ambassador to Tunisia](#), HMA Helen Winterton. Damien Moore MP, member of the BGIPU Executive Committee and Chair of the Tunisia APPG, hosted the briefing. Was stated that "Tunisia was initially hailed as a democratic success after the Arab Spring in 2011. However, years of political wrangling revealed flaws in the country's nascent democratic system. With the support of the disillusioned population, President Saïed dissolved the Tunisian Parliament in July 2011, gave himself the power to rule by decree, and suspended the Prime Minister." The Ambassador explained that "the UK intends to support Tunisia's political reform to maintain and build on the gains won in 2011", and that "political freedom and democracy remain key political priorities for the UK."
53. In June 2022, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon [emphasised](#) the UK's concern regarding President Saïed's decision to dissolve Parliament and the possibility of politicians from the previous government facing criminal charges. In the statement, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon expressed the need for democratic engagement, transparency, the protection of human rights and free speech to address Tunisia's economic and political challenges.
54. In response to the Constitutional Referendum in July, Lord Ahmad, [issued](#) a statement which outlined that the UK recognized calls for change during the constitutional referendum, but outlined concerns on voter participation, and a lack of transparency during the process.
55. On International Human Rights Day, celebrated in the British Parliament on 8 December 2022, Margaret Ferrier MP [expressed](#) concern over Tunisia's democratic backsliding, President Saïed's wide-reaching powers and female representation in Tunisia's Parliament.
56. Whilst there have not been any major updates in UK policy towards Tunisia, answers to written questions in recent months, against the backdrop of politically charged, arbitrary arrests, have indicated that the UK Parliament and Government are concerned about the recent bout of arrests and the political turn the country is taking under the leadership of Mr Saïed. The UK Government stated that Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and the UK Ambassador to Tunisia had [raised](#) these concerns with Tunisia's Chargé d'Affaires and Tunisia's Foreign Minister respectively on the 23rd of February. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon also [tweeted](#) his concern regarding the nature of recent arrests in Tunisia, stressing the importance of due legal process and respect for freedom of expression and association. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon emphasized the need for space to have legitimate political opposition, civil society and independent media in Tunisia.

57. Since the onset of the coup, UK parliamentarians have [raised](#) concerns over the use of military courts against civilians, the displacement of opportunities and the move away from a parliamentary system.
58. In March 2023, parliamentarians raised concerns regarding the implications for human rights in Tunisia in light of President Saïed's one-man rule, "[sham Parliament](#)", the [arrest of critics](#), including Nouredine Bhiri and [Said Ferjani](#), and scapegoating of sub-Saharan migrants. Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs David Rutley MP expressed concern over the reports of racially motivated discrimination and violence towards sub-Saharan migrants and encouraged Tunisia to comply with the international convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.
59. On 18 April 2023, a day after the arbitrary arrest of Rached Ghannouchi, elected Speaker of the 2019 Parliament and President of the Ennahdha Party, Lord Ahmad [tweeted](#) his concerns that "arrests, including of Rached Ghannouchi, and ongoing restrictions on legitimate opposition in Tunisia are eroding the space for political plurality." He also "urged the (Tunisian) government to respect the principles and values of an open and democratic society, for the benefit of all Tunisians."
60. On 4 May 2023, Lord Ahmed tweeted about his productive [meeting](#) with the Tunisian Foreign Minister, having discussed the UK-Tunisia bilateral relationship, political and economic challenges, as well as regional issues. Most recently, on 7 September 2023, he also tweeted about his productive [meeting](#) with the new Tunisian Ambassador to the UK, after they discussed the political situation, human rights, and Tunisia's economy, saying he hopes to continue an open dialogue on issues across the bilateral relationship. Tunisia had spent several months without an Ambassador to the UK.
61. On 11 May 2023, the [UK delivered a statement during Tunisia's Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, where it was noted with concern "an increasing trend of human rights violations, thus urging to the Tunisian government to ensure accountability and transparency in investigating excessive use of force by State agents, encouraging diverse representative participation in political life, including women and youth.", and stating that "a transparent, independent and efficient judiciary and the separation of powers are essential for a functioning democracy that serves its people. We note with concern the recent weakening of judicial independence." [Recommendations](#) were to (1) establish an independent National Human Rights Institution, in line with the Paris Principles, (2) expedite the amendment of the Penal Code and Criminal Procedural Code, in line with international standards, and (3) commit to ending the trial of civilians in military courts.

Asks

62. For Global Britain to truly be a reality, the UK must lead on the democratic community's response to the events in Tunisia. Whilst Tunisia has been for many years the key success story of the Arab Spring, there can be no room for complacency. In the last years, Tunisia has been facing serious challenges.
63. Whilst there are other conflicts and events occurring around the world and in MENA region, the situation in Tunisia is dangerously deteriorating and the last democracy within the Arab world cannot be allowed to succumb to anti-democratic forces. The UK must realize the long-term implications of authoritarianism and human rights abuses – it cannot turn its back on Tunisia.
64. The appeasement strategy embarked since the coup against democracy on 25 July 2021 has been unhelpful and has resulted in mass human rights abuses ordered by the Saïed regime. Tunisia's

partners should accept part of the blame and there is a tremendous responsibility on your part to help us out things right.

65. We communicated strongly in 2021 after the coup, and beforehand, that not backing Tunisian democracy would lead to a catastrophic immigration problem for Europe. We were ignored and subsequently Kais Saied's coup was tacitly supported.
66. Today there is a clear need for a full recalibration of the British position on Tunisia, which must start by taking a proactive role by backing opposition political parties who have coalesced in opposing Mr Saied's coup, civil society organizations that stood with democracy from the beginning of the political crisis in July 2021, and democracy in Tunisia by leading on enabling a Marshall plan that will not leave Tunisia on like support post the failing Saied Government.
67. The opposition had coalesced around a single platform to propose a joint vision and plan for the economy. Mr Saied, in April 2023, by arresting Mr Ghannouchi, and several other prominent leaders of the opposition, has ensured the most influential carrier of this initiative, is behind bars, after he had begun his crackdown against all critics, from across the political spectrum.
68. We are looking for Britain as well as other international partners to work with us to push for a post Saied regime that aligns with the plan put forward by the coalition of most opposition parties. The agreed plan aims to restore democracy and implement a clear pathway to restoring all the democratic instruments and institutions from before the coup and moving forward on a trajectory that restores a democratic system. The need for Tunisia to have viable democratic institutions once again which work in an effective way is critical to its future success.

Conclusions:

69. No political party can be excluded from any political process and it is time for all our partners and all democracy practitioners to accept that Kais Saied and other autocrats are neither a solution nor can they deliver stability as can be seen from the very visible disasters in the region and beyond. Current geopolitical interests clearly demonstrate that democracy in Tunisia, is the right example for economies to prosper.
70. We urge the **Foreign Affairs Select Committee** to:
 - Urge the UK Government to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, based on the March 2021 [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), the [Euro-Mediterranean Agreement of 30 March 1998](#) and the [22 September 2022 African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights ruling](#),
 - Call for a dialogue with all political and civic players to bring Tunisia back to the democratic path,
 - Submit written questions to the UK Government about human rights, democracy and the rule of law, state of the Judiciary, police violence, etc.,
 - Issue statements on the above topics,
 - Plan parliamentary debates in the British Parliament on one or several of the above topics,
 - Discuss and vote a resolution on one or several of the above topics,
 - Visit legitimate MPs in Tunisia and welcome those visiting London.

October 2023