



## Lost Between Recognition and Rejection: Tunisia's Relations with Israel

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Tunisia's relationship with its historic Jewish community and the Jewish state has been marked by sporadic progress and unfortunate setbacks. There has been a Jewish presence in Tunisia since before the Roman Empire; there remains one there today, and Tunisia is proud of this part of its history. Other Western-aligned moderate Muslim states like Egypt, Morocco, and the UAE have normalized relations with Israel. Others, like Saudi Arabia, have had longstanding not-so-secret relationships with Israel. Yet Tunisia lacks either, and is signaling that this will remain the case for the foreseeable future.

Tunisia, like its sister Maghreb states, Egypt and Morocco, is a moderate North African Sunni Muslim Arab country. Like them, it is aligned with the West regarding national security and foreign policy questions. Tunisia's principal trade partner is the European Union (EU), with France its single largest trade partner. Tunisia has maintained a relationship with the US ever since gaining independence in 1956, marked by collaboration on political, economic, and security issues. The US has extended financial aid, technical assistance, and support to Tunisia, particularly following the democratic transition in 2011. The Tunisian military purchases European and American equipment, and its military engages in joint exercises and counter-terrorism efforts. Yet even with Western ties and a moderate Sunni population, Tunisia's relationship with Israel remains markedly icy compared to that of its Arab state peers.

Egypt and Israel signed the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979. The peace treaty between Jordan and Israel was signed in 1994. With the advent of the Abraham Accords in 2020, Israel normalized relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which were soon followed by Sudan and Morocco. Israel has an ongoing not-so-secret security cooperation relationship with Saudi Arabia. Since 2008, Israel has participated in sporting events in Qatar, and in 2021 the two states agreed to trade in diamonds. So why has Tunisia failed to join the others in developing relations with Israel?

### **Tunisia's Jewish community**

The Jewish community in Djerba, Tunisia, is one of the oldest continuous Jewish communities in the world. It existed even before the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Under Muslim rule, the Jewish community was granted *dhimmi* status like other non-Muslim communities. During the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews led to a second community of Jews in Tunis. They brought Sephardic customs and spoke Ladino, differentiating them from the two-millennium-old Djerba community.

During the French protectorate period (1881-1956), the French granted French citizenship to segments of the Jewish community. By the time of Tunisia's independence in 1956, the Jewish population was estimated to be around 105,000. The first aliya from Tunisia to Israel began after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The second and larger aliya was in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War. Following the war, anti-Jewish riots broke out in Tunisia, leading many to flee. This resulted in around 40,000 Jews emigrating to Israel between 1967 and 1968. Today, it is estimated that only one to two thousand members remain.

### **The political elite, public opinion, and normalization with Israel**

Initial contacts between Israel and Tunisia were established during Tunisia's fight for independence, which was led by future Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba. In 1956, Tunisian representatives approached the Israeli mission to the UN seeking support for their cause. This followed unofficial meetings between Israeli and Tunisian representatives, with the Tunisian finance minister seeking Israeli aid for agricultural development. However, despite these initial steps, nothing materialized.

In 1982, after Israel invaded Lebanon, the PLO was forced to vacate that country and relocate. Tunisia agreed to a US request to host the PLO, and Yasser Arafat moved his headquarters to Tunis. In 1985, Israel conducted a raid against the base

(without Tunisia's consent), striking the PLO but missing Arafat. The operation resulted in the deaths of an estimated 60 people, many of whom were members of the PLO. However, the operation also resulted in civilian casualties, including Tunisian locals. Tunisians were incensed.

In 1987, Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ousted Habib Bourguiba in a bloodless coup. Despite publicly taking a strong anti-Israel stance, his administration maintained clandestine contacts with Israel. Then, as a byproduct of the 1991 Madrid Conference, Tunisia and Israel established low-level diplomatic relations culminating in opening an "Interest Section" in each other's countries. However, in 2000, following the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Tunisia broke off relations with Israel and the Interest Sections were closed.

In December 2010, the self-immolation of a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in protest against police harassment sparked a wave of demonstrations that launched the Arab Spring. In January 2011, unable to quell the demonstrations, Ben Ali fled the country and a transitional government took over. Later that year, Tunisia held its first free and fair elections, forming a coalition government led by the moderate Islamist party Ennahda.

Ennahda is the largest political party in Tunisia. Its political philosophy is much like that of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in Turkey. Rachid Ghannouchi, the founder of Ennahda, supports the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. Unsurprisingly, Ghannouchi has made no attempt to talk with Jerusalem.

In the parliamentary elections of 2014, Ennahda came in second and joined a unity government led by the secular Nidaa Tounes party. As Tunisian society liberalized, the nation also saw a rise in terrorism. The Bardo Museum in Tunis and a beach resort in Sousse suffered attacks in 2015 by gunmen affiliated with the Islamic State (IS). The Tunisian Jewish community was the target of several attacks, with the el-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba targeted several times. In 2002, an Al-Qaeda operative drove a natural gas truck fitted with explosives into the synagogue, killing 19, including 16 German and French tourists. It was al-Qaeda's first successful international attack after the September 11, 2001, attacks. The most recent attack was earlier this year when a national guard member opened fire at the synagogue, killing three of his fellow guards and two civilians.

## **Algerian opposition**

The normalizing of relations between Maghreb states and Israel is perceived by Algiers as a threat to Algerian national security. Algeria was aligned with the Soviet Union in the Cold War while Morocco was and remains friendly with Washington. This rivalry has manifested itself in the question of the sovereignty of Western Sahara. Since 1973, Algeria has backed the Moscow-supported Polisario Front, a Western Sahara independence movement, while Rabat has claimed the territory as part of Morocco. In November of last year, Washington recognized Morocco's claim over Western Sahara as part of a quid pro quo for Rabat's normalization of relations with Jerusalem. If Tunisia were to normalize relations with Israel as well, Algeria would be encircled by antagonistic states that have gained access to some of the world's best military training and hardware, an outcome greatly alarming to Algiers. As a result of these events, Algeria severed diplomatic ties with Morocco in 2021.

Algeria's significant aid to Tunisia is often seen as an attempt to keep Tunis away from the influence of Morocco and the American-led partnership. Although Russia sympathizes with Algeria's position and sells it weapons, it is unlikely to jeopardize its good relationship with Morocco for Algeria's sake. Similarly, despite its recent drone sale to Algeria, China's burgeoning partnership with Morocco may limit its support for Algerian interests. Tunisia's joining with Morocco on normalization would only exacerbate Algiers' isolation.

Despite Algeria's concerns, economic desperation might force Tunisia to consider joining the Abraham Accords. Plagued as it is by severe economic problems, Tunisia needs foreign aid, and joining the Accords might attract loans from the US, the Gulf States, or others. However, such a move could have serious internal and regional implications. For now, the potential political costs and risks seem to outweigh the perceived benefits of normalization, leading Tunisian officials to deny claims that Tunisia is on the verge of joining the Abraham Accords.

## **President Kais Saied**

Kais Saied, a political outsider, was elected president of Tunisia in a landslide in 2019. He proceeded to suspend parliament and dismiss the prime minister on the claim that he was saving the country from a corrupt and incompetent political elite. However, his detractors have denounced his actions as a coup that violated the democratically adopted constitution. Since then, Saied has consolidated his one-man rule. In early 2022, he dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, ending

judicial independence, and imposed a new constitution that gave him absolute authority. Saied has succeeded in strangling the Arab world's only democracy.

As president, Saied has regularly made inflammatory statements about Jews and Israel, such as blaming them for the country's economic and social problems, calling for a boycott of Israeli products, and praising Palestinian resistance. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that in response to a question about the deadly Djerba synagogue attack, Saied replied that Palestinians "are killed every day" and "no one talks about it."

## **Conclusions**

Upon initial review, Tunisia appears to have the prerequisites for quick normalization with Israel. It is a Sunni moderate Western-allied state with a long and storied Jewish community, and it could benefit from the trade and tourism normalization would provide. However, deeper scrutiny reveals that an adverse public, a dependence on the Algerian relationship, and a president hostile to Israel makes any near-term normalization doubtful.

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