

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 27, 2023

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to express our grave concern following Tunisian President Kais Saied's intensified crackdown against his perceived political opposition in recent weeks, a stark acceleration in Tunisia's autocratic consolidation.

Since February 11, 2023, President Saied has overseen a wave of politically-motivated arrests that have targeted activists, former ministers and members of parliament, senior political party figures, judges, lawyers, businesspeople, and members of the media, in apparent retribution for exercising their basic right to free expression.

We are particularly alarmed by credible reports that Tunisian authorities have charged individuals with "conspiring against state security" and "plotting to overthrow the government" under the Anti-Terrorism Law for meeting with U.S. diplomats, conducted arrests in violation of due process, denied detained individuals contact with their families for 48 hours, and used excessive force during an arrest which caused serious injuries to at least one detainee. More dissenting voices continue to be arrested or summoned for questioning on an almost daily basis.

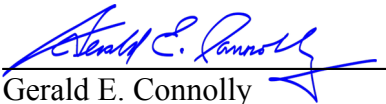
During this arrest campaign, President Saied also made repugnant racist and xenophobic remarks to suggest a "conspiracy" was underfoot to transform Tunisia into "a purely African country that has no affiliation with Arab and Islamic nations." Spurred by Saied's rhetoric, documented and undocumented migrants have been arbitrarily arrested by security services, officials have seized youth from nurseries, individuals have been evicted from their homes, and entire neighborhoods have been raided. Tunisia-based NGO's and journalists have also documented an increase in racially motivated assaults against sub-Saharan Africans by ordinary citizens. President Saied's comments appeared to be aimed at sowing division and inventing scapegoats for the country's acute economic crisis at a time of growing popular mobilization against his policies. The government's subsequent announcement that it would relax visa rules for citizens of African countries does not make up for the enormous damage these actions have caused.

Not only do these alarming developments and Tunisia's continued autocratic consolidation endanger the country's stability in a period of deep economic insecurity, they raise serious concerns about the future of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship, which since 2011 has been anchored by a shared commitment to democratic principles. It was these shared values that led the House Democracy Partnership to partner with Tunisia's parliament, and the U.S. government to designate Tunisia as a Major Non-NATO ally, strengthen security cooperation, and dramatically increase bilateral aid over the past 12 years.

We were encouraged to see State Department Spokesperson Ned Price voice concern on March 2, 2023, about the recent spate of arrests in Tunisia and reaffirm the administration's commitment to protecting freedom of expression. We urge the administration to continue to highlight Tunisia's significant democratic regression and insist on the immediate and unconditional release of all those arbitrarily detained. Further, we encourage the administration to ensure that any U.S. foreign assistance to Tunisia supports the restoration of inclusive, democratic governance and rule of law, or directly supports Tunisians in dire economic need, and does not strengthen the hand of those, including the internal security services, that have exacerbated repression and authoritarianism under President Kais Saied.

The administration should make clear that Saied's crackdown undermines the confidence in the rule of law that is essential for a flourishing U.S.-Tunisia relationship and international monetary support that could benefit the Tunisian people and alleviate economic hardship. Lastly, we urge the administration to make clear that President Saied's racist and xenophobic remarks are unacceptable, and work with partner governments and intergovernmental bodies such as the African Union to coordinate a clear and sustained message of strong support for democratic institutions and the right to peaceful expression in Tunisia.

Sincerely,



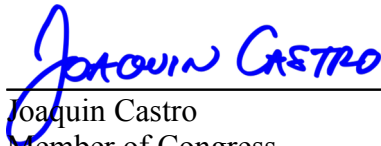
Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee
on Foreign Affairs



Dean Phillips
Member of Congress



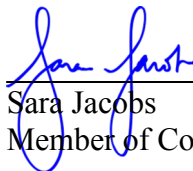
Joaquin Castro
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Donald M. Payne, Jr.
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