



TUNISIA

Area: 63,170 square miles

Population: 12.36 million (2022 estimate)

Capital: Tunis

Ethnic Groups: Arab-Amazigh/Berber (98%), European (1%), Jewish (1%)

Languages: Arabic (official), Tamazight (Berber languages), French

Religions: Islam - Sunni (98%), Christian (1%), Jewish (1%)

Literacy: 83.56% (2022 estimate)

Life Expectancy: 77.17 years (2022 estimate)

Economy: Agriculture: olives, dates, oranges, almonds, poultry; Industry: petroleum, mining (phosphate, iron ore), textiles, tourism;

Exports: textiles, agricultural products, phosphates, chemicals



Gender Inequality Index: 0.64 (ranked 120/146) in 2022

The African Continent's "West"

Tunisia is part of the North African region known as the Maghreb, from its Arabic name meaning “the West.” The earliest inhabitants of the present-day Maghreb were known collectively as the Amazigh (“free men” in Tamazight), pluralized as Imazighen, and known in Greek and Roman times as “Berbers” (from the Greek *barbaros*, or *barbarian*). The region became a strategic crossroads between the Mediterranean, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. During the first millennium BCE, Phoenicians set up trading centers along the Mediterranean coast. In 814 BCE, Phoenician settlers led by the legendary Queen Dido founded Carthage (located northeast of present-day central Tunisia), which developed as an important maritime trade metropolis in an empire that stretched from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, Sardinia, and Sicily.

When the city-state of Carthage became the only ancient power seriously able to threaten the rise of the Roman Empire, Rome waged a series of devastating wars against Carthage for control of the Mediterranean. The Punic Wars lasted more than a century (264-241, 218-201, and 149-146 BCE). During the Second Punic War, the Carthaginian general Hannibal famously crossed the Alps on elephants and invaded Rome. In 146 BCE, the Romans finally defeated Carthage, which they renamed “Africa” and established as their first Roman colony. Nearly 700 years of Roman rule followed, and the region became known as the granary of Rome. Under Roman rule, Carthage became a gateway to North Africa’s rich agricultural products, plus gold and salt from the south. Carthage also became a center for Christian scholarship and the home of the Amazigh philosopher St. Augustine. Some Imazighen converted to Christianity, for the most part joining the Donatist sect.

The territorial control once held by the Roman Empire declined and Germanic Vandals took over Carthage in 439 CE, followed by the Byzantines in 533 CE. Sweeping from east to west in the 7th century CE, Islam played a key role in the Maghreb region that also included Morocco and Algeria. The Islamic saint-crusader Sidi Oqba ibn Nafi established the first Islamic city in the region at Kairouan (Kairwan), south of present-day Tunis, today considered the fourth holiest city of Islam after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. The Arabs called the region *Ifriqiya*, an “Arabised” version of the name Africa. Although Islam spread through the region with relative ease, the Arab conquerors faced pockets of resistance from the Imazighen. One of the great resistance leaders was Dihya al-Kahina, an Amazigh queen born in present-day Algeria, who led her army against the Arabs, checking their advancement in Ifriqiya for over ten years. In 800 C.E., the Emir Ibrahim ibn Aghla founded the Aghlabid Dynasty, which extended Arab rule over Ifriqiya, eastern Algeria, and part of Sicily for more than 100 years, and made the Tunisian city of Kairouan its capital. Born in Kairouan, Fatima Al-Fihri (c.800-c.880) emerged as the era’s most notable Tunisian woman. She was the founder of early Islamic institutions in neighboring Fez, including al-Qarawiyyan, a mosque and *madrassa* (school) that became the Maghreb’s most important university and library, a world-renowned center for learning.

After the political fragmentation of the Arab empire, Tunisia became part of the Moroccan empire of the Almohads. During the 13th century the Hafsid monarchy, Amazigh descendants of the al-Muwahhid Dynasty, rose to power, ruling from 1207 until 1574, a period of stability and great prosperity. Eventually, the Ottoman Turks defeated the Hafsids. During the 17th and 18th centuries, direct Ottoman rule developed into rule by a local elite descended from the Turkish militia who settled in the area, mixing in with the Imazighen inhabitants. By the 18th century they had produced their own national monarchy, the Husainid Beys, who similarly emphasized trade and enriched the region through the production and export of olive oil. They also profited from piracy and protection money extracted from nations trading in the Mediterranean.

With the Ottoman Empire in decline by the 1830s, North Africa was destabilized by the imperial ambitions of the French, who invaded Algeria in 1830, partly in retaliation against the Barbary Coast pirates who were attacking European ships and disrupting

international trade. In spite of heroic efforts on the part of Tunisian ruler Ahmad Bey, his successor Mohamed Bey, and Prime Minister Khair al-Din to remain autonomous in the face of European imperialism, France invaded Tunisia from Algeria with an army of 30,000 in 1881 and declared a French Protectorate in 1883. By the turn of the century, French settlers had appropriated some of the most fertile farmland and began phosphate mining in the south. The French never exceeded 7 percent of the total population throughout the period of colonial rule, and they exercised a relatively minor influence over Tunisian religious and cultural life, until the period of decolonization following World War II.

Modern Politics and Culture

One of the influences credited to the French was the introduction of cinema to Tunisia via a Tunisian named Albert Samama Chikly, (1872-1933). A Jew born in Tunis, Chikly was educated in Paris, but returned home in 1896, as a representative of the Lumière brothers who had pioneered a new technology, the Cinématographe, ushering in the art of cinema. Chikly arranged for a screening of their silent films in Tunis, while also bringing the bicycle, radio, and X-ray technology to North Africa. During the next several years, he also made films and was awarded a bronze medal for his photography at the 1900 Paris Exposition. In 1908, Chikly documented Tunisian culture from a hot air balloon and later worked as a filmmaker during and after the Great War, eventually directing his first film *Zohra* (1922). A feature-length film two years later told the story of a young woman inside a forced marriage. *Aïn El-Ghazel/ The Girl from Carthage* (1924), is a prophetic focus on women-centered themes in Tunisian cinema that eventually would be embraced by the independent country's film industry.

Reformist social movements in the first decades of the twentieth century started lobbying for greater Tunisian participation in government and better access to Western-style education. In 1920 the Destour Party demanded a constitutional government ensuring equality between Tunisians and French settlers. When the Bey (the recognized state leader) championed the party's cause two years later, the French threatened to shut down the movement with military force. In 1934 Habib Bourguiba, a Sorbonne-educated lawyer, formed the Neo-Destour Party, which became highly successful at mobilizing populist support for national liberation. In 1938 the Neo-Destour Party was outlawed and Bourguiba and other leaders were arrested and deported to France. In 1942 during World War II when Germany occupied both France and Tunisia, Bourguiba was released. Despite his refusal to support the Axis powers, he was allowed to return to Tunis. After the war, the French returned to power. After waging two years of guerrilla warfare against the French, Bourguiba and his liberation movement eventually forced France to grant autonomy to Tunisia in 1955.

In 1956 Tunisia became an independent constitutional monarchy headed by the last Husainid Bey with Habib Bourguiba as president of the National Assembly. In 1957 the Bey was deposed and Bourguiba was elected president of the new republic. In the 1960s and '70s Tunisia followed an enlightened path of moderate socialism and campaigns for social justice, women's rights, and education, which transformed the small nation into one of the most literate and progressive in Africa. Bourguiba limited military spending, and allocated most of the national budget to education, agriculture, and health. Some critics, however, saw Bourguiba's legal and social reforms as an affront to traditional Islamic law and custom. Others noted Bourguiba's extreme measures to consolidate his own power and his growing intolerance for political opposition. After driving his opponents from the Socialist Destour Party, the only legal political party, Bourguiba, at age 72, was named president for life in 1975.

Following decades in power, Bourguiba was deposed in 1987 by Prime Minister Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Ben Ali was formally elected president in 1989 and won re-election repeatedly, under questionable circumstances, through 2009. Ben Ali's government was a leader in the Arab world in promoting the social and legal status of women, including suffrage, education, and availability of family planning. However, political repression and poor economic prospects ultimately brought down the government in early 2011.

On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunis, set himself on fire in protest of corruption and theft by government officials. His self-immolation sparked widespread street protests and riots, causing Ben Ali to flee the country in January 2011. This successful popular uprising in Tunisia sparked the "Arab Spring" of 2011, leading to uprisings and protests across North Africa and the Middle East, and ultimately to the toppling of autocratic governments in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.

In October 2011, Tunisians participated in free elections, bringing a moderately Islamist government to the secularization of power. Over the next few years, growing dissatisfaction within the secular community led to civil unrest and government instability. In December 2013, a compromise was reached which installed an independent caretaker government. In October 2014, a secular parliament was elected, followed by the election of a secular president, Beji Caid Essebsi, in December. Beji Caid Essebsi died in July 2019, five months before the end of his term. In October 2019 independent law professor Kais Saied won Tunisia's presidential election and remains in power.

In 2014, Tunisia set up a Truth and Dignity Commission with the mandate to "reveal the truth about the human rights violations" that took place during nearly 60 years of dictatorship and authoritarian rule in Tunisia between 1955 and 2013. Seeking national reconciliation, the commission wound up its work in 2018, with evidence that some of its goals were met. In 2015, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia" in the wake of the uprising in 2011.

Many fear that Tunisia's continuing economic ills and the presence of terrorist groups will undermine their tenuous democracy. Yet a Tunisian Arabic proverb tells us, "If talking is made of silver, then silence is made of gold." Even if we hear little of consequence today towards making things right, let us praise the silence and see what Tunisians will do tomorrow.

---Written by Candice Goucher, 2024

Readings and Viewings

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Mazrui, Ali A. *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986.

Rhett, Maryanne, "al-Fihri, Fatima," in Candice Goucher, ed. *Women Who Changed the World* (vol 1) (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO/Praeger, 2022), 43-48.

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