



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Tunisia covers 63,170 square miles (163,610 square kilometers) and is slightly larger than the U.S. state of Georgia. Hundreds of miles of sandy beaches line Tunisia's Mediterranean coastline. The Atlas Mountains divide the more fertile north and east from the arid south. Tunisia's central region rises to a plateau and then gives way to the semidesert terrain of the Sahel. Further south, dry salt lakes and scattered oases border the Sahara Desert. About 17 percent of Tunisia's land is suitable for cultivation, and another 13 percent is used for permanent crops (such as citrus). Oranges and olives are two major agricultural products. Orange orchards are found in the Cap Bon (the northeastern peninsula). Olive groves are common from Tunis (the nation's capital, in the north) to the central coastal city of Sfax, as well as on the island of Djerba, which lies off the southeast coast.

Tunisia's climate is generally mild; average temperatures range from 52°F (13°C) in winter (December–February) to 80°F (26°C) in summer (June–August). Toward the desert, temperatures are much hotter, especially when the south wind (sirocco, or *sh'hili*) blows. Sea breezes moderate the coastal climate. Winter nights can be cold in all parts of the country.

History

Throughout its history, Tunisia was a crossroads of many civilizations. Tunisia's indigenous inhabitants are known collectively as Berbers, but a more accurate indigenous term

for them is Imazighen (Amazigh, singular). Phoenicians founded Carthage in 814 BC. The Romans fought Carthage in three Punic Wars, eventually destroying it in 146 BC.

The two major influences shaping modern Tunisian society are Islam and the remnants of French colonialism. Islam came with invading Arabs in the seventh century AD. Indigenous groups gradually adopted the Arabic language and customs, and Tunisia became a center of Islamic culture. The Turkish Ottoman Empire ruled the area between 1574 and 1881. Economic difficulties and French colonial interests led to the Treaty of Bardo (1881), which made Tunisia a French protectorate. French culture soon became very influential, although it is less so today.

Tunisia was a major battleground during World War II. Before the war, many Tunisians had pressed for independence from France, and the movement picked up again after 1945. Independence was finally secured relatively peacefully in 1956. Habib Bourguiba, who had led the movement since the 1930s, became Tunisia's first president in 1957. Bourguiba was reelected every five years, always running unopposed, until he was named president for life in 1974. When he became too old to govern (in 1987), his prime minister, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, removed him from power and took over as president. Bourguiba, in three decades as president, left a strong imprint on Tunisia, with achievements in education, women's emancipation, and social modernization. He died in 2000.

Ben Ali was formally elected in 1989 and reelected in 1994 and 1999. Other political parties have always been legal in Tunisia, but they have little power against the governing Constitutional Democratic Rally Party (RCD). Political

parties of a religious or linguistic nature are illegal. Ben Ali is accused of suppressing dissent, but his supporters credit him with maintaining stability. A 2002 referendum extended the president's term limit from three to five, allowing Ben Ali to run for a fourth term in 2004. He won with 94 percent of the vote amid allegations of vote-rigging. Elections in October 2009 produced the same result: a dominant victory for Ben Ali, who won 89 percent of the vote. In December, protests erupted over high levels of unemployment and lack of political freedoms. The government's violent suppression of the protests left dozens dead. However, the protests continued, and Ben Ali was forced into exile in January 2011. An interim government was established, and it promptly issued an arrest warrant for Ben Ali.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Tunisia's population of 10.6 million is growing by almost 1 percent annually. About 23 percent of the population is younger than age 15. Most people (98 percent) are of Arab descent. Others, mostly of European descent, live mainly in and around Tunis or on the island of Djerba. Two-thirds of Tunisians live in urban areas. Greatly influenced by the French, who ruled the country for more than 75 years, some urban Tunisians consider Tunisia the most Westernized state in the Arab world. Still, most Tunisians identify more with their "Arabness" than their "Westernness." People in small towns and villages tend to be more conservative than those in cities. Opportunities for personal advancement are expanding, as is the middle class.

Language

Although Arabic is the official language, French is spoken in business and official circles. Urban Tunisians easily switch from one language to the other in the same sentence. Many high school students or graduates speak some English, since it is considered imperative to national and individual success. In 1996, primary schools began teaching English as well. Derija is the Arabic dialect spoken in Tunisia. Related to other North African dialects, it dominates in rural regions. Derija is a variation of the classical Arabic found in the *Qur'an*, but it is so different that a speaker of classical Arabic might not understand spoken Derija.

Religion

Islam is the official religion, and 98 percent of Tunisians are Muslim. The majority are Sunni Muslims of the Malikite tradition, as founded by Malik ibn Anas. He codified Islamic traditions and stressed the importance of community consensus (as opposed to Shi'i Muslims, who instead emphasize the authority of Muhammad's descendants). Islam plays an important role in daily life, especially during family events such as births, circumcisions, weddings, and burials. Friday is Islam's holy day; government offices and many businesses close at 1 p.m. Muslims accept the *Qur'an* as scripture, believing it was revealed by *Allah* (God) to the prophet Muhammad. Abraham is honored as the father of

Muslims. Muhammad is considered the last and greatest prophet. In addition to attending Friday prayer services at the mosque, devout Muslims pray five times daily. However, most Tunisians do not strictly follow this practice. In villages without mosques, *zawiyya* (small mausoleums built in memory of especially holy men) are the main centers for religious activity. One percent of the population is Christian and a smaller number is Jewish.

General Attitudes

Tunisians are a traditional, yet adaptable, friendly, and open people. They value hospitality, warmth, and generosity. People tend to act more formally with foreign visitors to give them the best impression of Tunisian culture. Tunisians are generally relaxed and informal with each other, but they also emphasize showing respect for one another, especially their elders. Conformity to a group (family or community) and concern for its well-being are usually more important than individual desires. Still, social status and possessions are valued, especially by men. A great achievement for a family is to have a son or a daughter graduate as a doctor, engineer, or lawyer. Tunisians tend to use phrases such as *In sha'allah* (God willing) and *Allah ghalib* (God is stronger) to express hopes or intentions. Difficult times are explained as *maktoub* ("written" implying that it is fate), an attitude that provides comfort and encourages perseverance. A Tunisian's concept of time is loose; most people do not keep to a rigid schedule, and some things can take a long time to get done. "Tomorrow" can mean next week, and a meeting scheduled for 10 a.m. might not start until after lunch.

Personal Appearance

In Tunis and other large cities, fashion is influenced by western Europe, particularly Italy and France. However, most rural Tunisians still wear traditional North African clothing. Older women, both in the city and countryside, might wear a white *safsari* (rectangular piece of cloth that completely covers the clothing) while in public. Once worn mainly out of modesty, the *safsari* today also protects clothing from dust and rain. Older Amazigh women might wear a *futah*, a dark red wraparound dress. Shorts and bathing suits are not worn in public, except in resort areas. However, young urban women might wear short skirts, while their rural counterparts are sure to at least cover their knees and shoulders. Rural women wear their hair up and covered; they let it down for celebrations and special occasions.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Greetings in Tunisia are an important and expressive part of personal interaction. Friends and family members often greet each other by "kissing the air" while brushing cheeks. Among strangers, both men and women, a handshake is the most common form of greeting. After a handshake, many rural people also kiss their right hand then lay it flat on the heart to signify warmth or sincerity. Men might also shake hands when parting. Standard greetings include *Al-salamah* (Hello),

Bi al-salāmah (Good-bye), *Sabah al-Khayr* (Good morning), and *Tassbah 'ala khayr* (Good night). Asking about someone's health and family is expected before further conversation. People say *al-salām 'alaykuhm* (Peace to you) when joining a group or entering a crowded room. When entering a store or office, a person greets the owner or staff. Neglecting to greet someone upon meeting is a serious oversight. Personal warmth is characteristic of all greetings.

Gestures

Hand gestures are vital to Tunisians in discussions and price negotiations. For example, the thumb and all fingertips pulled together and pointing up, while being waved toward the body, can mean “Good!” or “Wait!” depending on the context. One beckons by waving all fingers toward the body while the palm faces down. Using the index finger to point at objects is acceptable, but it is rude to point with the index finger at people. In general, it is better to place the index finger under the middle finger and point with both. Many Tunisians consider it inappropriate to wink at someone in public, but winking is fairly common among younger people.

Not all Tunisians subscribe to the tradition of avoiding the use of the left hand. Many urbanites use both hands freely. However, rural and some urban residents use only the right hand for shaking hands, passing objects, touching others, and eating. The left hand is reserved for personal hygiene. Like other Mediterranean peoples, Tunisians are spirited in conversational gestures and appreciate the same from visitors. Touching between members of the same sex is common to emphasize speech and communicate warmth. Friends of the same sex often walk hand in hand. However, men and women usually do not hold hands in public because public displays of affection are inappropriate.

Visiting

Family and friends visit each other frequently and unannounced—often in the late evening. Visits can last several hours, and guests usually are invited for a meal. It is especially important to visit neighbors and family on religious holidays. Because hospitality is important, a host usually offers food and drink to guests. Such an offer is accepted, even if only for a taste. Invited guests might bring gifts of fruit to the host, but this is not expected. Unannounced guests do not typically bring a gift. Hosts commonly give first-time visitors a tour of the home, especially if a new room or new furniture has been added. On such an occasion, guests might congratulate the hosts with *mabrouk*, a congratulatory wish also used for weddings, graduations, or new employment.

Eating

Tunisians wash their hands before and after meals. Eating from separate plates with utensils is common among urban residents. Rural people often sit on the floor around a low, round, wooden table (*mida*) at mealtime. They eat with the hand or use bread as a scoop and customarily eat from a common plate or group of dishes. Tunisians do not like to eat alone. A host will often insist that guests have second or third helpings, and it is polite for guests to accept. When a person has eaten enough, he or she express the meal was satisfying

by saying *Khamsa ou Khmis Aalik* (roughly meaning “You've done an excellent job”) or *al-Hamdu lillah* (Thanks to God). Burping after a meal is considered rude.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Honor, reputation, and mutual support are the most important family values in Tunisia. The extended family is typically close-knit. By tradition, gender roles are clearly defined, with men the breadwinners and women responsible for the household and children. Today, however, many women (one-fourth of the labor force) also work outside the home. Tunisia is progressive among Muslim countries in its laws concerning women's rights at work and in matters of divorce and inheritance. However, attitudes are changing more slowly than the law. Polygamy has been outlawed since Tunisia's independence in 1956, even though Islamic tradition allows a man to have as many as four wives.

Housing

About 80 percent of households own their own homes. High-rise apartment buildings are typical in urban areas. Free-standing European-style homes are also common and might include formal and family living rooms, three bedrooms, a large kitchen, and a veranda. Tunisian floors are almost always tiled, and kitchens and bathrooms have elaborate tiling on the walls. Wood is scarcely used and is limited to doors and window frames. The best furnishings are kept for the formal living room, which typically includes sofas and a china cabinet. Most cities and towns have a central area known as the *medina*, where Arabic architecture predominates. Access to electricity and plumbing is standard in urban areas and is almost always available in rural regions.

Dating and Marriage

Western dating practices were traditionally considered unacceptable, but attitudes are gradually changing. Rural marriages—sometimes between cousins—often are still arranged by parents, but urban youth have increasing opportunities to meet and become acquainted independently. Their parents still have a strong voice in whom they marry, but the couples have the final say. In all areas, weddings and social gatherings provide a chance for young people to meet. Tunisian men often delay marriage, as a man is expected to provide a considerable dowry to the bride's family before a marriage can take place. Traditional weddings, particularly in rural areas, are celebrated over several days, even weeks, through ritualized ceremonies and parties. The most important festivities occur in the last few days before the wedding. Men and women have separate parties. In one (called *seger*, or *halwa*), the bride's body hair is “waxed” off with a sugar, water, and lemon paste. A henna party follows on the night before the wedding. Women invited to the bride's home apply patterns to her hands and feet using a paste made from henna leaves (the dried paste is removed after several hours, leaving

patterns behind that last for several days). The bride also has her hair and makeup done. On her wedding day, a bride may change outfits several times, wearing one or two traditional dresses as well as a Western gown. After the ceremony, relatives and friends celebrate with dancing, music, and food.

Life Cycle

Mothers often sew a small verse of the *Qur'an* into a pouch attached to her newborn's clothes to keep the "evil eye" away and protect the infant from harm. In many regions, when a baby is one year old and able to sit up, an *al-Qaada* (sitting ceremony) is held. The infant is placed on a miniature rocking chair and presented with gifts. It is also around this age that girls' ears are pierced. Boys between age one and six are circumcised. The boy is dressed in a traditional outfit called the *Kiswa Tounsia* for the event. Families often hire traditional musicians and invite friends and relatives for a night of celebration. Upon reaching adolescence, girls sometimes receive gifts such as gold necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.

A burial usually takes place within a day of a person's death. The body is washed in rosewater and wrapped in thin sheets. In Tunis, the body is placed in the family living room, where visitors offer condolences to the family before the burial. In Sfax, only direct family members can see the body, which is kept in the person's bedroom until it is carried to the cemetery. Only men attend the funeral ceremony at the tomb, which women generally visit the next day. Tunisians pray intensely for the mercy of *Allah* on the person's soul on the day of burial, as it is believed that one's judgment begins the moment the tomb is sealed and people depart the cemetery. Family members gather to read from the *Qur'an* the day the person dies, the day of the funeral, and the following day. Readings also take place on each of the following three Wednesdays. Friends and relatives visit the family on each of the four Thursdays after the death. A final visit takes place on the fortieth day.

Diet

The national dish is *couscous*: steamed and spiced semolina, topped with vegetables and meats. Appreciated for its delicacy and lightness, *couscous* is prepared in many ways. *Breek*, another favorite dish, is made of a thin fried dough stuffed with egg, cooked vegetables, and tuna. *Tajine* is a crustless quiche of vegetables and meats. Tomatoes, potatoes, onions, olives, oil, and peppers are common to Tunisian cooking. A large variety of fruits are sold in the markets. Cactus fruit (*hindi*), called the "sultan of all fruits," is widely available in the summer. Other common fruits include dates, oranges, apricots, watermelons, and nectarines. Tunisians frequently eat fish, lamb, and chicken. *Tabuna* is a round bread baked in a cylindrical clay oven by the same name. Devout Muslims do not consume alcohol or pork, but alcohol is available in urban areas.

Recreation

Listening to music, watching videos or television, going to the beach, playing soccer and beach volleyball (mostly men), and visiting friends and relatives are among the most popular

leisure activities. Soccer is the most popular sport. Most people enjoy chess and *shkubbah*, a traditional card game. Coffeehouses are extremely popular among men, who go there to play cards, discuss sports and politics, conduct business, and drink coffee. Women usually do not go to coffeehouses unless in the company of male relatives. In rural areas, the weekly *souk* (market) is a focal point of activity; people come to buy goods and produce, to trade, and to socialize. On the night of a *souk*, families often enjoy a meal of *couscous* topped with fresh vegetables.

The Arts

Architecture and art from several ancient civilizations are ubiquitous. For example, the town of Dougga dates back to the Byzantine Empire. Roman mosaics are found everywhere. Tunisians are dedicated to preserving their rich heritage, for which the government provides financial support.

The government sponsors the Carthage Film Festival, held biannually, as a showcase for African and Arab films. Summer music and arts festivals attract large crowds. Strongly associated with Tunisian national identity, *malouf* is a musical style played by small orchestras with instruments such as drums, lutes, sitars, and violins. Calligraphy and fine arts such as painting on glass and miniatures are deeply embedded in the nation's past and present. Painting often combines native and French influences.

Holidays

Secular holidays are New Year's Day, Independence Day (20 Mar.), Martyr's Day (9 Apr.), Labor Day (1 May), Republic Day (25 July), Women's Day (13 Aug.), Evacuation Day (the day in 1963 when the last of the French troops returned to France, 15 October), and the Second Revolution (the day that Ben Ali assumed power, 7 November).

Muslim holidays follow the lunar calendar. The most important holiday period is *Ramadan*, a month of fasting and prayer. While Muslims do not eat, drink, or smoke from sunrise to sundown each day during *Ramadan*, they participate in lively evenings that involve special foods, carnivals, shopping, and festivals. *Eid al-Saghir*, a two-day holiday, marks the end of *Ramadan*. People wear their best clothes to visit friends and relatives, and they trade pastries as presents. Other holidays include *Ras al-'Am al-Hijri* (Islamic New Year), *al-Mawlid* (prophet Muhammad's birthday), and *Eid al-Kabir* (commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son). For *Eid al-Kabir*, each household sacrifices a lamb at dawn and feasts on grilled lamb throughout the day as relatives visit one another.

SOCIETY

Government

Tunisia is a republic divided into 24 governorates. The central government is headed by a president, who is elected to a five-year term. The president appoints a prime minister and a Council of Ministers. Members of the lower house of Parliament, the 214-seat Chamber of Deputies (*Majlis al-Nuwaab*), are directly elected to five-year terms.

Parliament's upper house is the 126-seat Chamber of Councilors. Elected officials (from the lower house and city councils) choose 85 of its members to represent unions and governorates; the president appoints the remaining 41 members. The voting age is 18. The RCD is the dominant party.

Economy

Agriculture, light industry, and services all play key roles in Tunisia's economy. Agriculture is especially important in the interior and along the Sahel coast; olives and dates are exported. Other agricultural products include olive oil, grain, dairy products, tomatoes, citrus fruit, beef, sugar beets, dates, and almonds. The textile industry (mostly for export) provides jobs for thousands of laborers, as does tourism, Tunisia's main source of hard currency. Most tourists come from Germany and France. Remittances from Tunisians in France and income from oil, phosphates, and iron ore are also vital. Eighty percent of all exports go to Europe. The economy is shifting toward a free market, and economic growth has generally been high. Tunisia has a well-educated workforce, but unemployment remains a significant problem with serious social implications. The currency is the Tunisian *dinar* (TND).

Transportation and Communications

A good network of paved roads and highways links all cities and towns. Major railroads serve northern and coastal areas. Tunis has an efficient light-rail system (*Métro Léger*). Buses are the most common form of public transportation. *Louages* (group taxis) run on set routes between cities and are faster than buses. Most families do not own cars. Motorcycles and bicycles are common. In rural areas, people may use donkey carts to transport goods and vegetables. There are airports in major cities.

Landline telephone service is generally good, but it may be slow in summer because the shorter work schedule strains the system. Most people have landline telephones in their homes. Mobile phone use has spread rapidly since the 1990s, so most Tunisians now own mobile phones. The press is closely regulated by the government. There are four television stations. The radio is a state monopoly. Internet use is widespread, especially among young people. Tunisians access it at home, internet cafés, and schools and universities.

Education

Education has been an important element in Tunisia's development since independence. Twenty percent of the government's expenditures are allocated for education. This allows even the most remote regions to have free schooling. *École de Base* (Basic Education, grades 1–9) is compulsory and nearly all children are enrolled. Students who go on to secondary school, or *Lycée* (grades 10–13), choose between various tracks, including math, science, economics, computer science, sport, and humanities and social sciences. The rigorous Baccalaureate Exam is taken at the end of the 13th grade; successful students may go on to a university. A student's passing the test is a great source of pride for his or her parents. While classes are taught in French and Arabic,

there is a trend to promote Arabic and the use of Arabic textbooks. Nearly half of all college students are women.

Health

The government provides free medical care to all citizens. Major cities have private clinics as well. Rural health care may be limited to clinics for child immunizations, family planning, and other basic services. Tunisia has made good progress in improving national health. For example, the infant mortality rate has dropped more than 85 percent since 1970.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	10,589,025 (rank=77)
Area, sq. mi.	63,170 (rank=92)
Area, sq. km.	163,610

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	81 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	56 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$9,100
Adult literacy rate	83% (male); 66% (female)
Infant mortality rate	22 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	74 (male); 78 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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