



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Tunisia covers an area twice as big as Austria or slightly larger than the U.S. state of Georgia. Hundreds of miles of sandy beaches line Tunisia's Mediterranean coastline. The Atlas Mountains, which span Morocco and Algeria, extend into northern Tunisia from the west. The Jebel ech Chambi is Tunisia's highest mountain, at 5,066 feet (1,544 meters). 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 arable, and 15 percent is used for permanent crops (such as citrus). Olives, olive oil, and citrus fruits are major agricultural products. Orange orchards are found in the Cap Bon (the northeastern peninsula). Olive groves are common from Tunis, in the north, to the central coastal city of Sfax, as well as on the island of Djerba, which lies off the southeast coast.

Located in northern Tunisia, the Ichkeul National Park, which contains important lakes and wetlands, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Tunisia is affected by environmental issues such as pollution, desertification, and limited freshwater resources.

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

### Early Civilizations

Throughout its history, Tunisia was a crossroads of many civilizations. Tunisia's Indigenous inhabitants are known collectively as Imazighen (Amazigh, singular). Phoenicians founded Carthage in 814 BC. The Romans fought Carthage in three Punic Wars, eventually destroying it in 146 BC.

### Islamic and French Influence

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.

### Independence

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. In three decades as president, Bourguiba left a strong imprint on Tunisia, with achievements in education,

women's emancipation, and social modernization. He died in 2000.

### **Reign of Ben Ali**

Ben Ali was formally elected in 1989 and reelected in 1994 and 1999. 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.

### **Protests**

In December 2010, 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. He was later convicted in absentia of embezzlement, smuggling, and other charges related to the deaths of protesters and was sentenced to life in prison.

### **Transitional Period**

After some delays, a landmark election was held in October 2011, in which roughly 4.4 million voters participated. The election saw a moderate Islamist party win a plurality of seats in the legislative body. In late December 2011, Moncef Marzouki was elected as interim president, and he appointed Hamadi Jebali as interim prime minister. Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly approved a new constitution in January 2014. Tunisia held its first parliamentary elections under the new constitution in October 2014 and free and competitive presidential elections in November 2014, thus marking a peaceful and democratic transfer of power. In December 2014, Beji Caid Essebsi was sworn in as president, and Habib Essid was appointed prime minister in early 2015. Tunisia once stood as a standard of democracy amid the revolutions that spread across the Middle East but is now adjusting to its new political pluralism and transition into a democracy.

### **Recent Events and Trends**

• **National security:** In January 2017, Tunisia and the European Union (EU) agreed to renew cooperative efforts to strengthen security in Tunisia against threats from the Islamic State (ISIS) and other Islamist militant groups. Tunisia's tourism industry, a significant part of its economy, has been weakened due to terrorist attacks targeting tourists. In 2015, dozens of tourists were killed in two attacks claimed by ISIS. The government is also tasked with combating the radicalization of its citizens, thousands of whom have gone abroad to join Islamist militant groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

• **Economic troubles and social unrest:** In April 2017, thousands of Tunisians protested in the southern city of Tataouine against poverty and unemployment, even booing Prime Minister Youssef Chahed off the stage at a town hall. Similar demonstrations have swept across other cities, such as the thousands-strong protests in the northeastern city of Al Kef, also in April. Tunisia's economy has suffered in the years since the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, and unemployment among young people is at about 35 percent, or

as high as 40 percent in rural areas. Tunisia witnessed large-scale demonstrations in 2016 calling on the government to address chronic unemployment and water shortages.

• **Domestic violence legislation:** In February 2018, legislation passed by the Tunisian parliament took effect that increased protections for women from domestic violence and sexual harassment. The law outlaws both physical and psychological abuse as well as discrimination against women, makes it easier to prosecute and penalize abusers, and provides for increased education about violence against women. Among Muslim countries, Tunisia is viewed as a leader in women's rights at work and in matters of divorce and inheritance.

## **THE PEOPLE**

### **Population**

About 25 percent of Tunisia's population is younger than age 15. Most Tunisians (98 percent) are of Arab descent. 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. Tunisia has a large, well-educated middle class.

### **Language**

Arabic is Tunisia's official language, and the Tunisian dialect is known as Derija. Derija is a dialect of modern colloquial Arabic that is significantly different from the classical Arabic found in the *Qur'an* (Islamic holy book). It is mixed with Amazigh languages, with some words borrowed from European languages. Tunisian Arabic is so distinct that a speaker of Arabic from a Middle Eastern country might not understand spoken Derija. Tunisian Arabic varies in vocabulary and pronunciation from rural to urban areas and from the north to south. French is used in business and daily life. 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.

### **Religion**

Islam is the official religion, and 99 percent of Tunisians are Muslim. The majority are Sunni Muslims of the Maliki 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). The remainder of the population belongs to various Christian, Jewish, and other faiths.

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 around 1 p.m. Muslims accept the *Qur'an* as scripture, believing it was revealed by God (*Allah*)

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, a *zawiyya* (small mausoleum built in memory of an especially holy man) serves as the main center for religious activity. Religious conservatism has grown since the 2011 revolution, resulting in clashes between secular and religious Tunisians.

### General Attitudes

Tunisians tend to be traditional yet adaptable, friendly, and open people. Hospitality, warmth, and generosity are valued in Tunisian society. 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. A great achievement for a family is to have a son or a daughter become a doctor, engineer, or lawyer.

Tunisians tend to use phrases such as *Insha' 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.

Tunisians generally have a loose concept of time; 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. In these areas of Tunisia, men typically wear casual clothes like jeans, T-shirts, and athletic shoes, but they wear Western business suits and ties at work. Traditional men's clothing, mainly worn in rural areas, includes a *jubbah* (a loose ankle-length garment), a *burnous* (a traditional wool cape worn during the winter), a *chachiya* (a traditional red hat with a black tassel), *balgha* (slip-on shoes), *seroual* (loose pants), and *kachabiya* (traditional heavy brown outerwear).

Older women, both in the city and countryside, might wear a traditional white or cream *safsari* (a rectangular piece of cloth that completely covers the clothing) while in public. Older Imazighen women might wear a *futah*, a dark red wraparound dress. Young urban women might wear short skirts, while their rural counterparts are sure to at least cover their knees and shoulders. Since the 2011 revolution, a growing number of Tunisian Muslim women have started wearing Islamic dress like the *niqab* (a veil that covers the face and leaves only the eyes exposed) and the *hijab* (Islamic head covering) in public places.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Greetings 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-salamah* (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 *Assalaam 'alaikum* (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 with the palm facing 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. Tunisians tend to be spirited in conversational gestures and may appreciate the same from visitors. Touching between members of the same gender is common to emphasize speech and communicate warmth. Friends of the same gender 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. It is also customary for the guest to say *Ma sha Allah* (God wills) or *Tebaraka Allah* (God bless) when praising new or valuable items as a way to protect it from the "evil eye" (the traditional belief that an envious look may cause harm)."

### Eating

Times for breakfast, lunch, and dinner differ from one family to another. In general, breakfast is eaten before going to work or school at around 7 a.m. Lunch is at midday and is considered the most important meal. Dinner is usually eaten at 7:30 or 8 p.m., though some people eat as late as midnight.

Tunisians often eat together in groups. Hands are washed before and after meals. Eating from separate plates with utensils is common among urban residents. Rural people often sit on the floor around a *mida* (low, round, wooden table) at mealtime. They eat with the hand or use bread as a scoop and customarily eat from a common plate or group of dishes.

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 expresses that the meal was satisfying by saying *Khamsa ou khmis 'alaik* (a saying that expresses admiration to someone for their personal strengths) or *Al-hamdu lillah* (Thanks to God).

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

#### Structure

Tunisian families are typically close-knit. Families consist of a father, mother, children, and paternal grandparents. Other relatives like aunts, uncles, and cousins may live in the same household or nearby in other homes. Grandparents often form strong ties with their grandchildren. The number of children per family varies by region, with an average of two children in urban areas and five or six children in rural areas. Traditional family values, like respecting the elderly, providing for the needs of one's family, and raising children to be educated, are still upheld. Tunisians also value and strive to maintain their family's honor and reputation.

#### Parents and Children

Parents usually support their children financially until they are independent, and adult children are responsible for taking care of the needs of their elderly parents. Young urban children are encouraged to focus on their studies instead of chores, though they may perform simple services like shopping for their parents. In rural areas, boys may leave school early to assist their father in his business, and girls may leave school to help their mothers in their work. Mothers tend to be closer to their children because they usually spend more time taking care of them. Working women rely on their mothers or mothers-in-law for child care. Some wealthy women also hire housemaids to clean the home and care for children.

Most unmarried adult children, especially daughters, live

with their parents until they are married or find a job. However, a growing number of young men and women move to large urban centers, like the capital city of Tunis, for work or school. When a young woman finds work or attends school away from her family home, she is expected to live in student housing or find a private apartment with other young women. Parents and children are comfortable asking family members for financial help, if needed.

#### Gender Roles

Men serve as the family's representative outside the home, support the family financially, and raise their children, especially sons, to adopt their same character and values. Women play a key role in their families and are responsible for cleaning, cooking, and attending to the needs of their children.

Though men are considered the heads of the family, they are no longer the family's sole breadwinners. Due to Tunisia's economic circumstances, many women have begun to work outside the home if they are able to find employment. Women often pursue careers in the fields of education and health care (usually as nurses). Many women also work in restaurants, boutiques, and malls. Rural women obtain income by weaving carpets, breeding sheep, making pottery, and sewing. Young women often work in French-language call centers or in clothing factories.

Tunisia is progressive among Muslim countries in its laws concerning women's rights at work and in matters of divorce and inheritance.

### Housing

#### Urban and Rural

High-rise apartment buildings are common in urban areas, and the apartments vary in size and price. Homes in the villages can be large or small, depending on a family's financial situation. Free-standing European-style homes, often called villas, are common in both urban and rural areas and might include formal and family living rooms, three bedrooms, one bathroom, a large kitchen, and a veranda. Some villas are very large and accommodate two or three families. Many Tunisian cities have a very old district, called a *medina*. Old homes in the *medina* are usually built of stone, with architecture influenced by the country's different historical periods. New homes are usually two-storey brick structures.

#### Exteriors

A home's architecture varies by region and is influenced by Arab and European styles. Traditional rural homes were constructed using stones, but now rural homes are built with materials such as brick, just like urban homes. Home exteriors are usually painted white and may be covered by decorative ceramic tiles as well. Most villas have large gardens with flowers and fruit trees.

#### Interiors

The floors of most Tunisian houses are tiled, and kitchens and bathrooms have elaborate tiling on the walls. Walls may also be painted in pastel shades or white. Wood is scarcely used and is limited to doors and window frames. The best furnishings, which typically include sofas and a china cabinet, are kept in the formal living room. Home interiors vary by

taste, but many Tunisians decorate their homes with family photos, art, and verses from the *Qur'an* (Islamic holy book). Access to electricity and plumbing is standard in urban areas and is almost always available in rural regions. Most rural and urban homes have modern conveniences like televisions, satellite dishes, and computers.

#### **Home Life**

Families tend to build homes near one another or may live in the same apartment building. Grandparents typically occupy the bottom-floor apartments, and their children live in the floors above. The living room is the most important room in the house and is where the family socializes and receives guests.

#### **Ownership**

Homeownership is highly valued by Tunisians, though some prefer renting. A high percentage of the population owns their own home, primarily through inheritance or building onto their parents' home. Those with stable employment and a regular salary qualify for bank loans. The very wealthy may own multiple homes, usually including one next to the coast.

### **Dating and Marriage**

#### **Dating and Courtship**

Romantic relationships between unmarried men and women are traditionally considered improper, but attitudes are gradually changing. In urban areas, youth have increasingly more opportunities to meet and form relationships independent of their parents. In large cities like Tunis, young men and women often date to get to know each other even though they may not necessarily intend to marry. In conservative towns and villages, a stigma is attached to girls who have had relationships before marriage.

Young men and women usually meet and get to know each other through work or school or by living in the same neighborhood. Many youth also meet on the internet through social networking sites. Men and women who are eager to find a spouse may ask to be set up through a friend, work colleague, or relative.

#### **Engagements**

Engagements typically involve the whole family, not just the individual couple. Families usually assign an important family figure to be responsible for the official hand-asking ceremony. Engagement ceremonies are held at the young woman's house, where her family and the young man's close relatives engage in casual conversation before the young man's father initiates the proposal. When the young woman's father accepts the offer, all who are present at the ceremony are invited to recite *al-Fatiha* (the first chapter of the *Qur'an*). Refreshments of *baklava* (baklava), tea, juice, and coffee are served. Usually the young man's family will bring a large cake and presents like perfume to the ceremony. Sometimes, the young man and woman will exchange rings during the ceremony. The engagement period may last one to three years.

#### **Marriage in Society**

A majority of Tunisians highly value the institution of marriage and expect to marry in their lifetime. When looking for a spouse, Tunisians desire a partner with high morals, a good family, and a stable salary. Initially, less emphasis is

placed on romantic love, but many hope to marry someone they can love.

Marriage traditions vary across Tunisia. Rural marriages—sometimes between cousins—often are still arranged by parents. Rural parents still have a strong voice in whom their children marry, but the couples have the final say. Urban men and women tend to have more independence in their choice of a marriage partner and may alter marriage traditions to reduce the cost of celebrations.

Men and women typically marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Unlike other Muslim countries, where men are allowed to take up to four wives, polygamy is banned in Tunisia. Sexual relations between same-sex partners are illegal, as is same-sex marriage.

#### **Weddings**

Today, Tunisian weddings often mix traditional elements with modern practices. Traditional weddings, most common in rural areas, are celebrated over several days, even weeks, through ritualized ceremonies and parties. Wedding ceremonies are often held in houses, hotels, wedding halls, or the local municipal court. The bride and groom usually organize separate celebrations with friends and family before the marriage ceremony. During the week of the wedding, female friends and family get together and wax off the bride's body hair with a sticky sugar ball called *halwa* or *sokker*. They also go to a *hamam* (traditional bath house) for pampering and relaxation.

The night before the wedding, women are invited to the bride's home to apply henna patterns to her hands and feet, symbolizing fertility and good fortune. Brides may wear the traditional *keswa* (a very ornate bodice and skirt ensemble) or a modern white wedding dress, and men may wear a *jubbah* (traditional white ankle-length garment) or a European suit. In some areas, brides change their wedding outfit several times throughout the celebrations.

All couples are officially married after they have signed the *sdak* (wedding contract) in front of a religious notary or municipal official. After the ceremony, relatives and friends celebrate with dancing, music, and food; men and women usually celebrate separately. In all areas, weddings and social gatherings provide young people with the opportunity to meet and socialize.

#### **Divorce**

Divorce is an increasingly common practice in Tunisian society. Social stigma is not usually attached to divorced men or women, though women may have more difficulty remarrying, as most men prefer to marry women who have not been previously married. A divorced woman and her children are entitled to receive support payments from the father.

### **Life Cycle**

#### **Birth**

After a woman gives birth, her mother and sisters take care of her. A new mother is usually given chicken soup while she is recovering. Women who work in government agencies or ministries are entitled to two months paid maternity leave. In the private sector, the duration varies but is generally one month. A man may take a short break of one or two days to

help his wife.

Parents, usually the father, name the child after a grandparent or use a traditional Islamic name like Mohamed or Ibrahim for boys and Khadija or Fatima for girls. Mothers often sew a small verse of the *Qur'an* (Islamic holy book) into a pouch attached to her newborn's clothes to keep the "evil eye" (the traditional belief that an envious look may cause harm) away and protect the infant from harm.

Seven days after the baby's birth, the family invites friends and neighbors to celebrate the baby's first bath. Tunisians believe that if the baby is washed by a healthy, beautiful, kind woman, the baby will be positively influenced in life. *Zreer*, a sweet cream made of honey and nuts, is served to guests.

In many regions, when a baby is one year old and able to sit up, a "sitting" ceremony is held. The infant is placed on a miniature rocking chair and presented with gifts. Families often hire traditional musicians and invite friends and relatives for a night of celebration. It is also around this age that girls' ears are usually pierced. Boys between age one and six are circumcised.

#### **Milestones**

Legally, young men and women are considered adults at 18. Upon reaching adolescence, girls sometimes receive gifts such as gold necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.

The *hajj*, or the pilgrimage to the Islamic holy sites in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, constitutes an important milestone and dream for many Tunisian adults. *Hajj* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, but only Muslims with the financial and physical abilities are required to do the *hajj*. It is considered a purifying holy journey, where the *hajj* (pilgrim) is cleansed of all sins and is prepared to meet God (*Allah*) after death.

#### **Death**

According to Islamic custom, the deceased's body is washed in rosewater, wrapped in thin sheets, and buried within 24 hours of death. The body is placed in the family living room, where visitors offer condolences to the family before the burial. Only men attend the funeral ceremony at the tomb, which women generally visit the next day. Tunisians pray intensely for the mercy of God 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 mourners 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. Religious chanters are usually hired to read the *Qur'an* and perform religious songs. 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, when people hold the *farq* (separation) farewell ceremony, which often involves dinner at the deceased's house as a tribute to the dead. The dinner is also an opportunity for extended family members to provide mutual support and comfort the immediate relatives of the dead. People often help the family with the food by bringing meat, fruits, and vegetables or offering money to the family of the deceased.

#### **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. Tunisian *tajine* is a crustless quiche of vegetables and meats. *Tajine* may also be a type of North African stew.

A large variety of fresh fruits and vegetables are sold in local markets. Tomatoes, potatoes, onions, olives, oil, and peppers are common to Tunisian cooking. Prickly pear, 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**

#### **Sports**

Soccer is the most popular sport, followed by basketball and handball. Generally, youth organize their recreation outside in streets, parking lots, and yards. Some parents enroll their children in sports clubs for basketball and soccer and enjoy following their athletic progress. Many Tunisians enjoy playing sports like volleyball and "beach ball" (played with rackets) on the beach. Traditional sports include hunting, sometimes with falcons, and fishing.

#### **Leisure**

Listening to music, watching movies or television, going to the beach, and visiting friends and relatives are among the most popular leisure activities. Most people enjoy chess and *shkubbah*, a traditional card game. Young people play snooker (a billiards game), video games, and *baby foot* (foosball) in a venue called a *salle de jeux* (a game room). Coffeehouses are extremely popular among men, who go there to play cards, discuss sports and politics, conduct business, and drink coffee. Urban women usually socialize at home but may go out with friends to family cafés. Old men often play dominoes (*chich bich*). Smoking *shisha* (a water pipe used to smoke fruit-flavored tobacco) is a daily hobby for a growing percentage of men.

In rural areas, the weekly *souq* (market) is a focal point of activity; people come to buy goods and produce, to trade, and to socialize. In coastal areas, men fish for enjoyment. During the summer, many Tunisians enjoy attending festivals where they can see musical and theatrical performances by artists from all over the Arab world.

#### **Vacation**

Tunisian families usually vacation during the summer while children are out of school. Coastal cities like Bizerte, Sousse, Tabarka, and Tunis are popular domestic vacation spots. Day trips to the beach are popular, but some Tunisians prefer to rent a house near the beach for a few weeks to a couple of months during the summer. During winter, Tunisians enjoy visits to desert cities like Douz and Ain Draham. Wealthier families may travel abroad to Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, or France.

### **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 annual Carthage Film Festival, a showcase for African and Arab films. Summer music and arts festivals attract large crowds, and classical music concerts are held during the summertime at the ancient El Djem amphitheater. Strongly associated with Tunisian national identity, *malouf* is a classic Andalusian 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 include New Year's Day (1 January), Revolution Day (14 January), Independence Day (20 March), Martyr's Day (9 April), Labor Day (1 May), Republic Day (25 July), Women's Day (13 August), and Evacuation Day (15 October). Evacuation Day memorializes the day in 1963 when the last of the French troops returned to France, and Revolution Day is a time to celebrate freedom and gather in Tunis's main street, singing and chanting revolutionary slogans and poems. Muslim holidays follow the lunar calendar and include *al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*, *Ramadan*, *Eid al-Saghir* (*Eid al-Fitr*), and *Eid al-Kabir* (*Eid al-Adha*).

#### *Al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*

The prophet Muhammad's birthday, or *al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*, is a special holiday for many Muslims. Men gather at the mosques to pray. Families spend the day visiting each other and remembering the prophet and his life. Families prepare *assida*, a traditional confection garnished with nuts. In certain parts of Tunisia, like Bizerte, people prepare candied chickpeas over a fire to offer to guests and children.

#### *Ramadan*

The most important Islamic holiday 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. Men also attend evening prayers at the mosque.

#### *Eid al-Saghir*

*Eid al-Saghir*, also known as *Eid al-Fitr*, a three-day holiday, marks the end of *Ramadan*. This is a joyful holiday that celebrates the successful completion of the holy fasting month. Families buy new clothes for their children, prepare special pastries like *baklawa* (baklava) and *makruth* (a semolina and minced-date cookie), and visit friends and relatives to wish them a happy holiday. Children especially enjoy *Eid al-Saghir*, as the older relatives they visit often give them money, which they may spend on toys or trips to amusement parks.

#### *Eid al-Kabir*

*Eid al-Kabir*, also known as *Eid al-Adha*, is a popularly celebrated holiday that commemorates the prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Each household sacrifices a

sheep at dawn and feasts on grilled lamb, *couscous* (steamed semolina), and *orban* (Tunisian sausage made of sheep liver, heart, and spices) throughout the day as relatives visit one another.

## SOCIETY

### Government

#### *Structure*

Tunisia is a parliamentary republic divided into 24 governorates. The president is head of state and the prime minister is head of government. The 217 members of the unicameral Assembly of People's Representatives are elected to five-year terms. Over a quarter of these are women. Most local officials are appointed by the government.

#### *Political Landscape*

Many political parties are active in Tunisia, but only a few have popular support. The Islamist Ennahda (the Renaissance) party, which was banned before the 2011 revolution, is a prominent player in Tunisian politics. Secular parties such as the centrist Heart of Tunisia and Tahya Tounes are also active.

The Tunisian government faces many challenges as the country continues its political transition in the face of deepening economic problems. The assassinations of two secular politicians in 2013 by a radical Salafist group caused many to doubt the government's commitment to preventing the spread of radical Islamist movements. In response to frequent large political protests, the government has begun to crack down on radical groups.

#### *Government and the People*

Tunisia's new constitution was approved in 2014. Tunisia is known for its progressive social policies and its protection of women's rights. Political activism is common, though some protests result in violent clashes with security forces. A majority of registered voters participate in elections. The voting age is 18.

### 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, and almonds. The textile industry (mostly for export) provides jobs for thousands of laborers, as does tourism. Tourism sharply declined during the political instability in 2011. Continued instability and prominent terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse in 2015 further weakened the tourism industry. Remittances from Tunisians in France and income from oil, phosphates, and iron ore are also vital. The economy is shifting toward a free market, and economic growth has generally been high. Tunisia has a well-educated workforce, but high unemployment remains a significant problem with serious social implications. The government will also be challenged to keep its deficits under control and reduce economic disparity. The currency is the Tunisian *dinar* (TND).



## Transportation and Communications

A good network of paved roads and highways link 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, mopeds, 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. Cellular phone use is widespread. Internet use also is widespread, especially among young people. Tunisians access it at home, internet cafés, and schools and universities. Social media sites are widely used for networking and obtaining news. Under Ben Ali's leadership, the press was strictly regulated. Following the 2011 uprising, journalists experienced fewer restrictions, and more media outlets were created. However, because of press stories that stoked tensions in 2018, journalists have faced mounting pressure from the government when reporting on security forces.

## Education

### Structure

Education has been an important element in Tunisia's development since independence. *École de Base* (Basic Education, grades 1-9) is compulsory and nearly all children are enrolled. Some children attend private primary schools, but public *École de Base* is most common. Secondary school is called *Lycée* (grades 10-13). The rigorous Baccalaureate Exam is taken at the end of grade 13; successful students may go on to a university. Many students choose to attend vocational schools, where they can learn professional skills.

### Access

The amount of public spending on education allows children in even the most remote regions to have free schooling. Students must pay for their own school supplies, books, and uniforms. Access to school is affected by a student's family financial status and the parents' level of education. Rural families are beginning to encourage their children to pursue more schooling to get better jobs and help their families.

### School Life

Primary schools teach subjects like science, history, geography, religion, and literature. After grade 10, students are able to pursue a specialized track of study in a field of their choosing, including math, science, economics, computer science, sports, humanities, and social sciences. While classes are taught in French and Arabic, there is a trend to promote Arabic and the use of Arabic textbooks.

In public schools, English is taught starting in grade 3. Some private kindergartens begin teaching English in the first year. Students address their teachers with the French titles of *Monsieur* and *Madame*. Teachers practice traditional instruction that emphasizes skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Collaborative skills, critical thinking, and research are not stressed until secondary school. Computers and the internet are used in almost every school.

Students spend a significant amount of time studying for tests and completing assignments. Depending on their educational level, parents tend to be very involved in their children's education and take pride in their academic achievements. Cheating is discouraged.

### Higher Education

Tunisia's higher education system follows the European degree structure of bachelor's, master's, and doctorate. Tunisia has a number of private and public universities. The top universities include Manouba University, Tunis el Manar University, and Sousse University. Public universities are mostly free but charge a small fee at the start of the school year. Higher education institutions work to produce a competent and skilled workforce, with many students pursuing studies that promote practical industrial skills. More women are enrolled in colleges and universities than men.

## Health

The government provides free medical care to all citizens. However, some public hospitals charge fees for medical services, which are reimbursed depending on one's insurance policy. Major cities have private clinics as well. Rural health care may be limited to clinics for child immunizations, family planning, and other basic services. Tunisians generally trust their doctors and their treatments. The most common health problems affecting Tunisians are chronic diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Tunisia has made good progress in improving national health. For example, maternal and infant mortality rates continue to decrease.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia, 1515 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005; phone (202) 862-1850; web site <https://www.tunisianembassy.org>.

### Country and Development Data

Capital	Tunis
Population	11,811,335 (rank=78)
Area (sq. mi.)	63,170 (rank=91)
Area (sq. km.)	163,610
Human Development Index	91 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	63 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$9,700
Adult Literacy	86% (male); 72% (female)
Infant Mortality	12 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	74 (male); 79 (female)
Currency	Tunisian Dinar



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