

# Riding wave of support for fighting corruption, Tunisian prime minister tests Washington waters

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, basking in popular support for a successful campaign against corruption, is to visit the United States to check on Washington's enthusiasm for Tunisia's experiment with democracy.

The United States frequently cites Tunisia as a model for democratic transition in the MENA region after a popular revolt overthrew autocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 and touched off upheaval across the Arab world.

Before US President Donald Trump was inaugurated, Washington was a staunch backer of Tunisia's nascent democracy, providing cash, loan guarantees and other financial facilities, as well as military and security support. Former US President Barack Obama noted the "courage and dignity of the Tunisian people" as they undertook "this brave and determined struggle."

■ Chahed's fight against corruption is not without risks to both his political future and to Tunisia's stability.

In his first visit to the United States as prime minister, Chahed is expected to seek expanded military, security and economic cooperation to shore up Tunisia's democracy. It faces numerous challenges, including the threat posed by jihadists, economic stagnation and popular disillusionment with Islamists who entrenched themselves in parliament and the government during the instability of the "Arab spring."

Human rights activists and advocates of multiparty democracy will carefully assess how Chahed is received in Washington as a gauge of the Trump administration's level of

support for Tunisia.

The Trump administration has expressed wariness of political Islam with the US president urging action "if you have people coming out of mosques with hatred and death in their eyes and on their minds."

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Chahed's political rivals wonder whether he will be embraced by the Trump administration at a time when he needs to bolster his leadership at home.

At 41, Chahed is Tunisia's youngest prime minister in 60 years. His popularity among Tunisians surged to 80% in early July from 54.6% in May, an opinion poll by the local Sigma pollster indicated. Chahed's soaring popularity stems from his campaign to stamp out widespread corruption, which he called an existential threat to Tunisia's democracy.

His anti-corruption campaign began in May with the arrest of a score of businesspeople and suspected accomplices, including Chafik Jerraya, who once dared Chahed to arrest him given his strong links to the media and other spheres of influence.

"Chahed cannot arrest even a young goat," Jerraya boasted in a live television interview.

Chahed expanded his offensive against suspected corrupt businesspeople and smuggling networks by seizing assets of football boss and businessman Slim Riahi, who has doubled as a politician since an unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2015.

The extended drive against corruption surprised almost everyone in Tunisia for its boldness and fuelled Chahed's support among a



Surging popularity. Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed (C) greeting people during a visit to the southern Tunisian resort island of Djerba. (AFP)

populace frustrated by the spread of graft and stalled economic growth.

Chahed's fight against corruption is not without risks to both his political future and to Tunisia's stability, especially if his rivals undermine his efforts.

Chahed has no organised political force of his own. Although originally a leading figure of the main secular Nidaa Tounes party, he has distanced himself from all political parties.

Nidaa Tounes and the powerful Tunisian General Labour Union are clamouring for a government reshuffle to advance their own representatives in Chahed's cabinet and influence his initiatives.

Politicians are either jealous of his popularity or fear that a further expansion of his fight against corruption could hit their allies in business and the bureaucracy.

Chahed said the battle will go on: "Tunisia is fighting three big wars:

One against terrorism in which we are achieving tangible results; a second against corruption, which becomes a scourge threatening the democratic political system; and the third, which is the mother of all wars, the one to win the challenges of development and job creation." "All these wars need patience and unity," he said.

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.

## Why cutting US assistance to Tunisia is a mistake

### Viewpoint



Elissa Miller

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson released the fiscal year 2018 budget request for the State Department and the US Agency for International Development in May. The budget request is framed within US President Donald Trump's "America First" mantra and outlines several priorities, most important of which are defending US national security and asserting US leadership and influence.

However, in foreseeing significant cuts in foreign assistance to US partners in the Middle East, this budget request fails to meet the stated priorities. In particular, Trump's decision to cut aid to Tunisia is shortsighted and will do more harm than good for US national security interests.

The 2018 budget request includes an almost 70% cut in assistance to Tunisia. Bilateral US assistance would fall from approximately \$177 million in fiscal year 2016 to \$54.5 million. US military assistance to Tunisia would face the steepest cuts, as the administration is reportedly planning to adjust military assistance to several countries, including Tunisia, from a

grant to a loan.

This would complicate assistance to Tunisia, as there is no guarantee should the North African country decide to accept the loan that it would be able to pay back the funds.

In highlighting US national security as a major priority, the budget request emphasises Trump's commitment to defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) and other transnational terror groups, countering illegal trafficking, ceasing the drivers of instability and irregular migration and bolstering key US allies to defend shared interests. The cuts in foreign assistance to Tunisia imperil all these goals.

Tunisia is frequently referred to as the success story of the 2011 Arab uprisings. However, the country remains in a fragile transition phase and is particularly susceptible to the threats that this budget ostensibly aims to address.

Cutting military assistance to Tunisia and converting aid from a grant to a loan will not help Tunisia address shared threats, particularly those from ISIS militants in Libya and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. While ISIS was ousted from its hold on the Libyan city of Sirte last year, the group continues to pose a threat to the West as evidenced by the Manchester bombing in May. It is likely that some of the group's fighters will seek to cross into Tunisia. Indeed, Tunisia has previously been beset by attacks from militants crossing

from Libya.

Tunisia remains one of the largest exporters of foreign fighters. The Berlin attack in late 2016 by a Tunisian demonstrates the threat that ISIS and other militant groups pose in their efforts to radicalise discontented Tunisians. Tunisia is also a transit country for irregular migration from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Countering migration in these transit countries and at its source is critical, even more so than addressing the migrant crisis once it hits Europe's shores.

The reduction in aid to Tunisia also fails to meet this budget's goal of restoring US leadership and influence. The Trump administration seeks to reduce its commitments to allies abroad "in anticipation that allied nations will provide a more equitable cost-share." However, in turning its back on Tunisia, which became a major non-NATO ally under President Barack Obama in 2015, this budget would abandon US leadership at a time when it is desperately needed. Tunisia faces slow growth, high rates of unemployment and surging public and external debts.

In 2016, the International Monetary Fund approved a four-year, \$2.9 billion loan for Tunisia. However Tunisian authorities have been slow to enact needed reforms. Targeted US assistance could play a key role in maintaining support for Tunisia while pushing for the adoption of difficult macroeconomic reforms. The status quo will not be

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sustainable for long as recent protests in the country demonstrate. A strategy that better targets US assistance, rather than slashing it, and works in concert with European partners that are supporting Tunisia's economic and democratic transitions would do much more to bolster US credibility and leadership.

A recent survey of State Department employees indicated concern regarding the Trump administration and Tillerson's leadership. The survey indicated that State Department employees question whether the administration understands the role that the State Department plays "in forwarding the interests of the United States in the world."

The 2018 budget request suggests that this administration fails to acknowledge the crucial role that US assistance plays in supporting key allies across the world.

The Trump administration aims to put America first. However, the United States cannot succeed if it abandons much-needed support to allies, particularly those in the Middle East and North Africa, that are on the front lines facing major global threats.

Cutting support to Tunisia is a misguided decision that will hurt, rather than benefit, US national security interests in the long term.

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