

## Tunisia as litmus test for US policies



Mark Habeeb

Washington's policy towards Tunisia is a small litmus test of whether the United States wants to remain a great power.

A "great power" is a country that has important interests beyond its borders and the wherewithal and willingness to defend them. This is why Finland, for all of its impressive economic and social success, is not a great power. This is why French leaders sought so hard in the decades following the second world war to maintain influence and a security presence in West Africa: France was determined to preserve at least the trappings of "great power" status.

That the United States has important interests overseas is not in doubt. Neither is the fact that the United States has the wherewithal – militarily, economically, diplomatically – to defend those interests. The question, and for many the concern, is whether the United States has the willingness to defend those interests.

The administration of President George W. Bush certainly had the willingness to partake in foreign ventures, ostensibly to defend US interests. The problem is that it did so recklessly and even delusionally, believing it could impose US values and systems on others. The result is that US interests were not defended. In fact, by shattering and



**Higher interest.** US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R) and Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed during their meeting on Capitol Hill in Washington, last July. (AP)

fragmenting Iraq, the United States enhanced Iran's regional influence.

The Obama administration responded to the costly recklessness of its predecessor by pivoting away from the Middle East and seeking to protect US interests elsewhere through multilateralism and sweeping trade deals. Barack Obama's hands-off approach to Syria, even after Moscow directly intervened, epitomised the new policy.

Now it's US President Donald Trump's turn to shape US policy. Trump knows that the United

States has interests overseas but he sees the defence of these interests in immediate and narrow transactional terms: What's in it for the United States today? If we spend money, will we get more in return?

This is where Tunisia serves as a litmus test of whether the United States can 1) recognise long-term overseas interests and 2) is willing to defend these interests. Tunisia is the one "Arab spring" success story but a fragile one. Tunisians on their own have created the kind of society and government that Bush tried to install at gunpoint. If the

entire Middle East were like Tunisia... well, we can only dream.

Trump's proposal to dramatically cut US aid to Tunisia is, in its own way, as reckless as Bush's military escapade. It is hard to think of a cheaper and less dangerous way to defend US interests than by helping Tunisians succeed in their democratic experiment.

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## From abstract to urgent, a test of US global leadership



Jason Isaacson

In Washington, the issue of American leadership – much in the news after US President Donald Trump's interactions with counterparts in Europe and the Middle East – has a distinctly abstract air.

However, 4,500 miles away in Tunisia, where the preservation of security and democracy are urgent concerns, the issue is anything but abstract.

The United States is needed in Tunisia. The Americans' economic assistance, military equipment and know-how and most of all their consistent partnership as this pioneer country of the Arab upheaval, six-and-a-half years after ousting its last dictator, seeks to make irreversible its embrace of representative government.

American global leadership, a guarantor of stability, security and peace for the country and its allies since the end of the second world war, is the opposite of a fixed asset. Squandered or abandoned, leadership diminishes over time. It requires continuous assertion – and continuous investment.

It hardly needs repeating that the benefits of this expensive investment are nearly incalculable. US investment in NATO enabled Europe to enjoy decades of freedom and growth, protected from Soviet expansionism.

Forceful American advocacy of democracy and universal human rights; generous US support for

global economic development, entrepreneurship and disease prevention; strategic American recruitment of many of the world's best and brightest students and rising political leaders; the United States' steady shattering of scientific boundaries and US-led humanitarian intervention in response to natural disasters – these and other pursuits and commitments, none of them cheap, have saved lives, bolstered American political influence and affirmed the United States' indispensable role in the international order.

Robust and bipartisan American commitment to military superiority has backstopped and enforced US global leadership and must never be neglected but strength is an ingredient of leadership, not a substitute or a synonym for it.

It is in this context of necessary investment in US global leadership and of the definition of leadership that one must view the debate over Trump's proposed international affairs budget and congressional moves to reshape it.

In setting forth the US State Department's spending blueprint for fiscal year 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asserted that it "addresses the challenges to American leadership abroad and the importance of defending our national security interests," while recognising that "US diplomacy engagement and aid programmes must be more

efficient and more effective."

Efficiency and effectiveness in the expenditure of tax dollars – on an international aid and diplomatic architecture that consumes approximately 1% of the federal budget – must always be a management priority but when a new administration proposes a 32% cut in international affairs spending, as the president's blueprint outlined, it suggests that the priority is not efficiency but withdrawal: Withdrawal from active diplomatic engagement in the world's trouble spots and future trouble spots, withdrawal from a seat at the table in international negotiations, withdrawal from the day-to-day demands not only of US leadership in a complex and unpredictable world, but even of American global citizenship, withdrawal from support for good friends in need.

Congress may reverse this backward-looking budget plan. The House Appropriations Committee is poised to discard much of its disinvestment in international affairs and rumblings in the Senate suggest it may be on a similar path.

In the president's proposed budget, US economic and military assistance to Tunisia, a country that bravely established and has steadfastly defended democracy for more than six years, while fighting off Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists and confronting chaos on its Libyan border, would be cut

from \$177 million in fiscal year 2016, the last full programme year, to \$55 million in fiscal 2018. Military aid would shift from grants to loans, which the cash-strapped Tunisian treasury can ill afford. The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative, which, among other projects, provides US scholarships for a cadre of the next generation of Tunisian leaders, would be slashed by more than 60%.

Tunisia is imperfect. Its democracy is not fully developed, one of its major parties bears the biases and dangers of the Muslim Brotherhood and endemic corruption – a target of the determined new prime minister – is a drag on the economy and good governance. Its foreign policy would benefit from fresh thinking about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Tunisia has been a friend of the United States for more than two centuries and, as it seeks to fulfil its citizens' aspirations, fight common enemies and defend common values, it deserves consistent US engagement and support. Whether it and other needy friends get that support will be another in this season's tests of US global leadership.

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## Safeguarding Tunisia's success highlights US Congress's foreign policy role



Ellen Laipson

Tunisia is a paradox. It is the "Arab spring's" one fragile success story, still committed to a democratic path. It is also the largest recruiting ground for Islamist terrorist groups, revealing deep fault lines in the country's efforts to provide its citizens with more political and economic opportunity.

The Trump administration is

sending mixed signals in terms of its approach to the country, highlighting the key role the US Congress can play in ensuring a balanced and productive policy.

Tunisia – small, relatively homogeneous and endowed with strong human development indicators rather than natural resources – is the last "Arab spring" country standing. It has run truly contested elections, finding a way to integrate moderate Islamists into the historically secular political elites.

Its struggles abound, however. The economy has weakened since dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fell from power in 2011, dropping Tunisia from the World Bank designation as an upper-middle-income country to lower-middle-income status. Terrorism and corruption have dominated policy debates.

The parliament is considering measures that, in theory, would help restore the economy and empower security forces to deal more effectively with internal

threats but are deeply worrying for Tunisia's democratic future.

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