

March 3, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

During the Summit for Democracy you convened in December, you rightly [noted](#): “As we continue to work at home to bring the United States closer to what we call a ‘more perfect union,’ we’re doubling down on our engagement with and support of democracies around the world.” This principle is driving your efforts to lead the free world in defending Ukrainian democracy against Russian aggression. Yet Ukraine is not the only country facing grave threats to its democracy, which is why we now write to urge your administration to significantly increase U.S. efforts to help Tunisia reverse its rapid slide back into authoritarianism.

Since President Kaïs Saïed’s [power grab](#) on July 25, 2021, he has effectively imposed one-man rule on Tunisia, securing unchecked control over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. He has unconstitutionally frozen parliament, shut down the independent National Anti-Corruption Authority, [dissolved](#) the Supreme Judicial Council, [sidelined](#) the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), and disregarded the country’s prized 2014 democratic constitution. In December, in response to domestic and international pressure, Saïed finally announced a political “roadmap” for the period ahead. The roadmap, however, lacked important detail and was produced unilaterally, without transparency or input from other Tunisian political and civic actors. Far from being a path back to democracy, the roadmap extends Saïed’s unchecked power through at least the end of this year. Saïed’s other anti-democratic actions include [prosecuting](#) citizens—some in military trials—for criticizing the government, [using](#) police brutality against peaceful protesters, and [drafting](#) a restrictive new NGO law.

While many Tunisians initially welcomed Saïed’s power grab in the hope that he would resolve the country’s economic malaise and increasing political dysfunction, that support has steadily decreased as months have passed. Saïed has failed to provide a serious plan to address the economic crisis, and he has refused to work with Tunisia’s political parties or civil society (including the Nobel Peace Prize-winning National Dialogue Quartet) to overcome Tunisia’s challenges. A January 2022 poll [indicates](#) that pessimism about the country’s future has nearly doubled since July.

After the 2011 revolution, the U.S.-Tunisia relationship flourished, driven by the recognition that a democratic Tunisia is in the interest of the United States. As you outlined in your [speech](#) during the Summit, democracy is the best way to “unleash human potential and defend human dignity and solve big problems.” Democratic countries make better diplomatic and trading partners, and they are more effective at resolving crises and providing security and stability. It is this understanding that led the United States to invest in Tunisia’s democratic transition, designating the country a Major Non-NATO Ally, strengthening security cooperation, providing billions in loan guarantees, increasing bilateral foreign aid tenfold,

supporting Tunisian and U.S.-based NGOs, and growing bilateral trade over the past decade, including a 45 percent increase in foreign direct investment from the United States. Saïed’s reversal of Tunisia’s hard-won democratic gains threatens the foundations of the strong post-2011 U.S.-Tunisia relationship. They also pose serious risks to Tunisia’s stability, as Tunisia’s democratic transition had helped it become an important bulwark against terrorism and insecurity in North Africa.

Unfortunately, we fear that the absence of a strong U.S. reaction to Saïed’s assault on democracy may have encouraged him to press forward on his destructive path. We now urge your administration, in this [Year of Action](#) on democracy, to press President Saïed to take concrete steps to return Tunisia to democratic governance. As an incentive, we recommend that your administration back additional economic support for Tunisia *only* upon the completion of those steps. They should include the quick return of a freely elected legislative body; the reinstatement and empowerment of independent bodies including the Supreme Judicial Council and the National Anti-Corruption Authority; and the protection of political pluralism and freedom of association, speech, and the media. This conditionality should apply to all forms of additional assistance, including new bilateral aid and loan guarantees, the Millennium Challenge Corporation compact, and support for loans from international financial institutions.

Such an approach of offering incentives for progress—particularly if done in close coordination with other democratic allies and international financial institutions—would demonstrate support for the Tunisian people while encouraging urgently needed moves to protect democracy. We also encourage your administration to work with Congress to condition U.S. security assistance on the Tunisian government’s ending trials of civilians in military courts and ensuring full accountability for instances of police brutality. Saving Tunisia’s democracy is ultimately up to Tunisians, but the United States should do whatever it can to help, both to protect U.S. interests and to uphold democratic values.

Sincerely,\*

Ambassador Jake Walles, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia, 2012–2015*

Ambassador John T. McCarthy, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia, 1991–1994*

Ambassador Michael McFaul, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Russia, 2012–2014*

Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2012–2014*

Ambassador Stephen Seche, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, 2007–2010*

Ambassador Robin Raphel, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia, 1998–2000*

Ambassador Cameron Hume, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Algeria, 1997–2000*

Ambassador William Taylor, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, 2006–2009*

Ambassador Kurt Volker, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to NATO, 2008–2009*

Ambassador Patrick Theros, Ret.  
*U.S. Ambassador to Qatar, 1995–1998*

J. Brian Atwood  
*Administrator, United States Agency for  
International Development, 1993–1999*

Elliott Abrams  
*Council on Foreign Relations*

Michele Dunne  
*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

Carl Gershman  
*Former President,  
National Endowment for Democracy*

Larry Diamond  
*Stanford University*

Nicole Bibbins Sedaca  
*Freedom House*

Elisa Massimino  
*Georgetown University Law Center*

Amy Hawthorne  
*Project on Middle East Democracy*

Tom Hill  
*Former Senior Professional Staff,  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs*

Sarah Yerkes  
*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

Monica Marks  
*New York University Abu Dhabi*

Mohamed Soltan  
*The Freedom Initiative*

Andrew Albertson  
*Foreign Policy for America*

Nancy Okail  
*Center for International Policy*

Mai El-Sadany  
*Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*

Ambassador Mark P. Lagon, Ret.  
*Friends of the Global Fight Against AIDS,  
Tuberculosis, and Malaria*

Anne-Marie Slaughter  
*New America*

Jim Kolbe  
*U.S. Congressman, 1985–2007*

Kenneth Wollack  
*Chairman,  
National Endowment for Democracy*

Thomas Carothers  
*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

Stephen McInerney  
*Project on Middle East Democracy*

Stephen Grand  
*Network for Dialogue*

Eric Bjornlund  
*Democracy International*

Daniel Brumberg  
*Georgetown University Democracy and  
Governance program*

Charles Dunne  
*Arab Center Washington DC*

Shadi Hamid  
*Brookings Institution*

Ramy Yaacoub  
*Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*

Kate Seelye  
*Middle East Institute*

Seth Binder  
*Project on Middle East Democracy*

Intissar Fakir  
*Middle East Institute*

Sharan Grewal  
*College of William & Mary*

Steven Heydemann  
*Smith College*

Nader Hashemi  
*University of Denver*

Stephen J. King  
*Georgetown University*

I. William Zartman  
*School of Advanced International Studies,  
Johns Hopkins University*

Peter Mandaville  
*George Mason University*

Mieczysław P. Boduszyński  
*Pomona College*

Juan Cole  
*University of Michigan*

John P. Entelis  
*Fordham University*

John L. Esposito  
*Georgetown University*

---

*\* Institutional affiliations are provided for the purpose of identification only.*