

World Watch Research

Tunisia: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Tunisia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
12,565,000	23,300	0.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

For centuries, Tunisia has had a strategic position in the Mediterranean region. Its original capital, Carthage, was once the arch-enemy of ancient Rome, until it was completely destroyed at the end of the [Punic Wars](#) in 146 BC (Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 26 June 2024). The Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs and the Ottomans all included Tunisia as a province in their respective empires, until it became a French protectorate in 1883. Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956. The first president, Habib Bourguiba, introduced secular influences such as the emancipation of women ([BBC Tunisia country profile](#), updated 13 September 2023). In 1987, President Bourguiba was replaced by President Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia until he was ousted from power through the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.

In 2011, an interim government took over and a new constitution was approved in January 2014. A coalition of secularist and Islamist parties emerged from the December 2014 elections, but the new government struggled to deal with both security and economic challenges. However, even more concerning was the [infighting](#) within the political parties, resulting in October 2019 with the election of a total outsider as president (The Washington Institute, 6 November 2018). While not giving clarity on many issues, newly elected President Kais Saied vowed to combat corruption and poverty. Saied is a professor of law and known to be socially conservative. Although he [promised](#) to advance women's rights (Al-Monitor, 23 October 2019), in practice he has supported campaigns against several women rights activists ([Carnegie Endowment, 19 October 2023](#)).

Parliamentary elections took place in October 2019 as well, with the Islamist Ennahda party winning most seats (52 out of the 217). Together, the Islamist parties occupied 81 of the 217 seats in parliament. Within less than two years, three different governments were formed, with the rapid changes in government leading to political instability. Meanwhile, the power and position of the president increased and on 25 July 2021, President Saied arbitrarily used that position and emergency powers in the Constitution to sack the Prime Minister and suspend parliament after violent protests had erupted against the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the dire economic situation ([BBC News, 27 July 2021](#)). While the Ennahda party accused Saied of staging a coup, the Tunisian populace responded with indifference or even with joy, tired of a decade of political incompetence ([The Guardian, 27 July 2021](#)).

President Saied quickly consolidated his position, replacing the independent High Judicial Council in February 2022 with a self-appointed council to oversee the judiciary and sacking 57 judges in another move to end judicial independence in June 2022 ([France24, 13 February 2022](#); [France24, 2 June 2022](#)). In March 2022, Saied dissolved parliament after some parties tried to overturn his decrees ([The Guardian, 31 March 2022](#)). He further opened investigations against several political opponents and had several media figures and journalists arrested for a short period for their critical reporting on the president ([CPI, 7 October 2021](#); [Africa News, 25 March 2022](#); [Al-Jazeera, 12 June 2022](#)).

The grand finale and the start of a new way of running the country took place with the constitutional referendum in July 2022, which turned Tunisia into a presidential republic with almost absolute power for the president. Despite winning with a landslide victory, the low turnout of about 30%, partly due to a boycott by the opposition, seems to suggest that only a fraction of society supports the president's move ([Al-Jazeera, 27 July 2022](#)). This was further confirmed during the parliamentary elections in December 2022, when the record low turnout of only 11.3% severely undermined Saied's legitimacy ([DW, 30 January 2023](#)). Under the new Constitution parliament will only play a minor role - something many Tunisians are opposed to.

Saied continued his crackdown on the opposition and journalists in 2023 and 2024. Several opposition leaders as well as media figures were arrested in February 2023 ([ReliefWeb, 24 February 2023](#)). A key moment came in April 2023 with the arrest of main opposition leader Rached Ghannouchi, the head of the Ennahda party ([Al-Jazeera, 20 April 2023](#)). Despite widespread and global condemnation of his arrest, he received a one-year prison sentence in May 2023 ([Le Monde, 15 May 2023](#)) and another three-year prison sentence in February 2024 ([Al-Jazeera, 1 February 2024](#)). Further arrests and sentences followed in 2023 and 2024, with among others a one year suspended prison sentence for another opposition leader and the arrest of several journalists ([Al-Jazeera, 4 October 2023](#); [Al-Jazeera, 13 December 2023](#))

President Saied received his strongest international rebuke yet after holding a racist inflammatory speech in February 2023, in which he accused Sub-Saharan Africans of coming to the country to bring "criminality and violence" and a plot "to change the demographic composition of Tunisia". ([African Business, 6 March 2023](#)). His comments led not only to a wave of violence against the relatively small Sub-Saharan African community in the country, but also to attacks on Tunisians of Sub-Saharan African descent ([Euronews, 14 March 2023](#)).

The next election is scheduled for 6 October 2024 ([AP News, 3 July 2024](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Under the new 2022 Constitution, Tunisia has a presidential system with almost absolute powers for the president. The legislative part of the government consists of two chambers, with limited legislative powers. The prime-minister and the cabinet ministers are appointed by the president. A vote of no-confidence needs a two-thirds majority in both chambers, making it very unlikely to pass. Even if such a vote was to be held, the president can always avoid it by dissolving parliament instead.

Following the president's power grab in 2021, the Economist Intelligence Unit's ([EIU 2023](#)) categorization of Tunisia changed from 'flawed democracy' to 'hybrid regime' (in a ranking ranging from 'full democracy', 'flawed democracy', 'hybrid regime' to 'authoritarian state'). The FFP's Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 Tunisia](#)) has Tunisia's 'cohesion indicators' scoring high, a reflection of how the previously ruling elite did not manage to build trust among the general population. The 27% difference in turnout between the 2014 parliamentary elections (69%) and the 2019 parliamentary elections (42%) would seem to prove this point. The even lower turnout for the 2022 constitutional referendum (30%) and for parliamentary elections (11%) would seem to suggest that the president has failed to increase levels of trust. Hence, 'political indicators' show that state legitimacy remains contested. In addition, especially 'human rights' deteriorated significantly during 2023, probably as a result of the

president's inflammatory speech against Sub-Saharan African migrants, as well as the forced expulsion of those migrants.

The key challenge for the president is the necessary revitalization of the economy, especially due to the COVID-19 crisis and the food and energy crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The deteriorating economy has even caused thousands of Tunisians to try and reach Europe ([Carnegie Endowment, March 2024](#)). Hence, reviving the economy will be absolutely necessary if the president wants to keep popular support since most Tunisian citizens have lost all faith in politicians and politics alike.

The role of Islam

In a rather surprising move, the new 2022 Constitution does not name Islam as state religion, which is almost unique in the wider Islamic world. However, Article 5 states that Tunisia "belongs to the Islamic Ummah" and that the state is required to "achieve the purposes of Islam in preserving [people's] souls, money, religion and liberty". In addition, the reference that Tunisia is a "civil state" has been removed. In practice, it seems up to the president to define the relationship between Islam and the state. Hence, it remains unclear how Freedom of Religion and Belief will further develop for Tunisia's Christians, with Article 5 sounding distinctly worrying ([Religious Freedom Institute, 14 October 2022](#)).

Gender perspective

Although the 1973 ministerial decree prohibiting the marriage of a Tunisian Muslim woman to a non-Muslim has been abolished, the Personal Status Code still mentions as an impediment in Article 5 the marriage between a non-Muslim male and a Muslim female. In practice, Tunisian women still struggle to marry a (foreign) non-Muslim man, both due to social and local government opposition ([Al-Araby, 25 September 2018](#)). Tunisia was widely praised for withdrawing all of its reservations to the CEDAW Convention in 2014, which had previously given Sharia precedence in areas of conflict with the Convention ([OHCHR, 17 February 2023](#)). Despite this positive step, legal inequalities and de facto discrimination against women persist. While the country has a relatively high female parliamentary representation, reports highlight the lack of employment opportunities for women and ongoing societal discriminatory norms, reflected in the rather poor female labor participation rate ([World Bank Blogs, 23 December 2020](#)).

Furthermore, existing legislation on domestic violence is insufficient; whilst a 2017 law on violence against women was viewed as a landmark step, it did not comprehensively address domestic violence and the enforcement of the law has been widely faulted ([Human Rights Watch 2024 Tunisia country chapter](#)). Marriage and divorce are governed under the Personal Status Code (2012) and afford men and women equal rights in most respects. However, only men are recognized as the head of the household or family (Article 23) and men retain guardianship of children following a divorce. In light of this, as well as the stigma surrounding divorce, many women choose to stay in abusive marriages. These legal inequalities can all be weaponized for the purpose of religious persecution.

Religious landscape

Tunisia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	23,300	0.2
Muslim	12,502,000	99.5
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	100	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	2,100	0.0
Bahai	2,600	0.0
Atheist	3,700	0.0
Agnostic	30,800	0.2
Other	220	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to World Christian Database 2024 estimates, 99.5% of Tunisians are Muslim, the majority being adherents of Sunni Islam, with most following the Maliki tradition. This is one of the largest groups within the Sunni tradition. A major center of Maliki teaching from the 9th to 11th centuries was in the Mosque of Uqba in Tunisia. Despite the French legacy of laicite (French: secularism) among the urban and educated elite, Islam is very influential. As stated above (see: *Political and legal landscape*), although the new 2022 Constitution no longer recognizes Islam as state religion, it now states that Tunisia belongs to the Islamic Ummah and it obliges the state to "achieve the purposes of Islam".

Christianity and Judaism are the most significant minority religions, although the number of agnostics/atheists is far greater than both, with more than 30% of the 18-29 years old claiming to be 'non-religious' ([Arab Barometer, 23 March 2023](#)). The number of Christians with a Muslim background are growing in number in Tunisia. This gradual growth of the Church has become noticeable since the 1990s. However, Christianity is regarded as a foreign religion by the government and there is no formal recognition of indigenous church communities ([US State Department IRFR 2023 Tunisia](#)). Tunisia's Christians from a Muslim background remain socially marginalized and are kept under surveillance by the security services.

There are also small Shia and very small Bahai and Jewish minorities in Tunisia.

According to Humanists International's [Tunisia - Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 28 October 2020):

- "The government subsidizes mosques and pays the salaries of imams. Local religious committees and imams must be approved by the religious affairs directorate. The president appoints the grand mufti of the state. The government allows the Jewish community to worship freely and pays the salary of the grand rabbi. It also provides some security for all synagogues and partially subsidizes some restoration and maintenance costs."

According to [Middle East Concern Tunisia country profile](#), accessed 10 July 2024:

- "Both expatriate and local Christian communities enjoy relative freedom in Tunisia, provided that they avoid activities that could be construed as proselytism. A potential source of threat is from Salafist organizations, though recent attacks have principally been on cultural and economic targets rather than against non-Islamic religious groups. The most significant challenge for local Christians is the family and societal pressure that is often faced by those who choose to leave Islam, though this only takes violent forms in extreme cases."

Within this context, both male and female converts face significant pressure if their faith becomes known. Women face the prospect of forced marriage and house arrest, whereas men may be subjected to physical attack, death threats and social isolation.

Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook Tunisia](#) (accessed 10 July 2024):

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$10,600 (2022 est.)
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 8.31% (2022 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 17.8% (2022), with youth unemployment being twice as high at 38.3% (2021)
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 16.6% (2021 est.)

According to the [World Bank's Tunisia Economic Monitor - Spring 2024](#)

- **General outlook:** "Tunisia's economic recovery slowed in 2023, due to a severe drought, tight financing conditions and a modest pace of reform, leaving the country's growth below pre-COVID levels, and making it one of the slowest recoveries in the Middle East and North Africa region."
- **Economy:** "After the significant slowdown in 2023, we expect a moderate rebound of the economy with a 2.4 percent growth rate in 2024, and a 2.3 percent growth in 2025–26. These growth forecasts are subject to significant downside risks related to the external financing conditions, the evolution of the drought and the pace of fiscal and pro-competition reforms. Tunisia's public finance and external account will remain precarious in the absence of sufficient external financing. "

- **Inflation:** "Inflation started to moderate since the peaks of February 2023 on the back of lower global prices and weak domestic demand. ... However, inflation is still high, particularly for food, as the drought and import compression reduced the supply in domestic food markets. The recent government measures to contain food prices focused on hoarding behavior and enhancing price controls but food inflation remains elevated. New analysis shows that most of the recent inflation episode is driven by rising profits and import prices, pointing to the important role of competition and trade policy to fight inflation."

Reports from other sources

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (FY 2022) puts the Tunisian economy in the lower middle income category .
- [Fragile States Index 2024](#) Tunisia shows that while 'Economic inequality' continued to decrease (although remaining at relatively high score), the 'Human Flight and Brain Drain' worsened. The 'Economy' indicator improved, but remains at a high score.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU Democracy Index 2023](#)) writes: "We expect the president, Kaïs Saïed, to secure re-election in the scheduled 2024 poll. Given the new constitution, which he largely drafted, Mr Saïed will exercise almost absolute power, which he will use to further sideline political parties and pursue a populist agenda. However, continued economic strains will be a major pressure point for the president, as earlier support for his power grab rested largely on public discontent with the failure of successive governments to improve economic conditions. As we do not expect Mr Saïed's regime to do much better on this front, public discontent will remain high, leading to periodic strikes and protests. ... Public finances will be increasingly strained, leading to payment arrears and shortages of subsidised goods".

Despite Tunisia's initial successful transition from a one-party dictatorship to a multiparty democracy, its economy continued to struggle, with unemployment remaining steadily around 15% and youth unemployment being more than twice as high. Obviously, it did not help that Tunisia had 13 governments in 9 years, with three new governments between the October 2019 parliamentary elections and the suspension of parliament in July 2021 ([Carnegie Endowment, 28 March 2019](#)). The COVID-19 crisis had a major effect on the economy, especially since tourism sharply declined as a result of pandemic restrictions. An increasing number of Tunisians joined the Sub-Saharan migrants in seeking asylum in Europe ([VOA News, 29 December 2022](#)). Years after President Saïed seized power, it still has to be seen whether he can improve the stability of the government and the economy. At present, many Tunisians struggle with recurrent scarcities of essential items, including food ([The National News, 23 March 2024](#)).

Situation for Christians

Overall, Christians in Tunisia are kept out of positions in the government and army. The coming years are likely to become even more difficult for Christians due to the struggling economic situation. Although the tourism sector keeps recovering from the effect of the COVID-19 restrictions ([The Media Line, 27 June 2024](#)), it is likely that Tunisia's economy will continue to struggle. Thus the lack of economic opportunities available to the younger generation has worsened. This in turn causes Tunisia's brain drain and the possibility of social unrest to grow.

Gender perspective

As of 2022, the labor force participation rate among females is 26.2% compared to 66.3% among males ([World Bank Gender Data Portal 2023 Tunisia](#)). Women are, in general, the most economically vulnerable in Tunisia, due to patrilineal inheritance practices and limited work opportunities ([Georgetown 2019/20, p.15](#)). Non-Muslim women married to Muslim husbands may not inherit from each other by default, unless they pursue a legal judgment based on constitutional rights ([US State Department IRFR 2023 Tunisia](#)). In addition, the government classifies all children born from such marriages as Muslim and prohibits them from inheriting from their mothers.

Culturally, men are expected to provide an income, while women take care of the children. Male Christians can face pressure in their workplace or lose employment due to their faith; as the primary breadwinner this serves to destabilize their wider dependent families. Furthermore, male converts may also be denied their due inheritance. Female converts, on the other hand, may become destitute if forced out of the home upon discovery of their conversion.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Tunisia](#) (accessed 10 July 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Tunisian population (98%) are from Arab decent, with others having European (1%) or Jewish (1%) ancestry
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French being widely spoken too. Tamazight, the official Berber language, is spoken as well
- **Population:** Tunisia has a population of around 11.975.000 people (2023 est.), with a growth rate of 0.63% (2023 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 70.5% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.34%
- **Literacy rate:** 82.7% of the population can read and write; with a difference between men (89.1%) and women (82.7%) (2021)
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 38% of the population, making it a country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** 77.3 years on average; women (79.1 years), men (75.7 years)
- **Education:** Tunisia's citizens enjoy 15 years of schooling on average (2016)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Tunisia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2023):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Tunisia ranks #101 out 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.732.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.928, women are disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Conservative Islam

Tunisian society is mainly conservative and Muslim, although there are differences between the (rural) south and (urban) north. Also influenced by links with France (for instance, when family members reside there), there is a strong liberal urban youth culture. Tunisian Christians, almost all of them from

a Muslim background, remain side-lined and are discriminated against by family and society. Once their conversion becomes known, they face pressure to recant their faith and might be threatened with divorce or with forced marriage to marry a Muslim. Converts from Islam to Christianity are also likely to be excluded from family inheritance and lose custody rights.

In April 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief [reported](#) on Tunisia (World Watch Monitor, 23 April 2018). He concluded that "old laws and societal pressure pose the greatest challenges to religious freedom in Tunisia; a number of old laws, such as 'public morality concepts' and 'public order provisions', are used to enforce restrictions on, for example, food consumption during Ramadan."

According to Humanists International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 28 October 2020): "Islamic religious education is mandatory in public schools. The courses on Islam take up roughly one hour per week and non-Muslims are able to request an exemption. The religious curriculum for secondary school students also includes the history of Judaism and Christianity. The state allows other religious groups to educate in private schools."

Gender perspective

In September 2017, Tunisia [overturned](#) the law that prohibited Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men (BBC News, 15 September 2017). For converts from Islam to Christianity this was a particularly significant step. However, social opposition [prevents](#) implementation of the law in practice (The New Arab, 8 August 2018). In November 2018, the government proposed an amendment of the Personal Status Code, which would lead to gender equality regarding inheritance rights. However, the proposal [ignited a huge debate](#) as conservative Muslims regard it as being contrary to the Quran and Islamic law (Al-Monitor, 7 December 2018). President Saied is known to be an opponent of equal inheritance for women. According to BTI 2020, there is educational gender balance in Tunisia with more than 90% of both sexes being literate and more women than men entering higher education. However, women remain significantly under-represented in the workforce, particularly in higher positions, with a 23.8% labor force participation ([UNDP Human Development Report Tunisia](#)). This is an indication of the societal conservative views on marriage and motherhood. Violence within the domestic sphere rose during the COVID-19 pandemic; the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Seniors reported a seven-fold increase of domestic violence reports during the national lockdown. A study published in October 2020 reported that psychological violence was the most frequent use of abuse ([Sediri et al, 17 October 2020](#)).

Technological landscape

According to [Digital 2024: Tunisia](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 79.6% penetration. Most North African countries, including Tunisia, are making rapid progress in technological development. However, many (only) have Internet access via their mobile phones.
- **Social media usage:** 56.9% of the total population. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in June 2024, 52.3% of Facebook users were male and 47.7% female.

- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 133.7% of the total population. Statistics indicate that around 95% of women have access to cell phones ([Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021](#)).

As reported by Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Tunisia](#):

- Tunisia is rated as "partly free".
- "Despite attacks against online expression following Tunisian president Kais Saïed's July 2021 seizure of extraordinary powers, Tunisia's internet freedom score has remained the highest in the Arab world. However, individuals risk prosecution for publishing online content that is critical of the president, security forces, or the government, and some users have experienced harassment in response to their online activity. Several laws criminalize online speech, and the newly enforced Decree Law 2022-54 imposes harsh penalties for speech-related offenses and expands state surveillance capabilities. The state of emergency was once again renewed in January 2023, granting government agencies the ability to access the contents of electronic devices without a court order. While government-ordered censorship is uncommon, an increase in misinformation and self-censorship has negatively impacted the reliability and diversity of online content."

Although the freedom of the press significantly increased after the Arab Spring revolution, the July 2021 seizure of power by the president caused serious reasons for concern. [Reporters without Borders 2024 Index](#) ranks Tunisia #118, increasing from #121 in 2023, but dropping from #94 in 2022 and #73 in the 2021 index. According to RSF: "The political crisis shaking the country, and Saïed's uncertain commitment to press freedom, have had major repercussions. Since coming to power in October 2019, the Carthage presidential palace no longer receives journalists, despite protests from the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT).", increasing "fears of a major setback for press freedom."

Christians in Tunisia, especially converts from a Muslim background, have to be careful when posting on social media, although threats often remain limited to online verbal abuse. Many Christians in Tunisia use a pseudonym when posting Christian material. Those who are too overtly active on social media risk being tracked down by the authorities or by Islamic radicals. However, with the rise of Internet access and social media, many converts to Christianity can now find fellowship online, even if they are alone and isolated (as was the case during the COVID-19 lockdown measures).

Security situation

On 17 October 2023, following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, pro-Palestinian demonstrators destroyed and set fire to a 16th-century Jewish tomb and shrine ([Le Monde, 24 October 2023](#)). This attack followed an earlier major incident in May 2023, when a member of the security services opened fire during a Jewish festival at the popular tourist island of Djerba, killing five people - two Jewish pilgrims and three servicemen ([France 24, 12 May 2023](#)). In both cases, the government downplayed the seriousness and the antisemitic nature of the attacks in a bid to minimize any damage to the recovering tourism sector ([Al-Jazeera, 21 May 2023](#)). Nonetheless, especially the May 2023 attack serves as a reminder of the two large-scale attacks in Tunis in 2015, in which Islamic militants linked to the Islamic State group (IS) killed at least 60 tourists and civilians ([BBC News, 27 June 2015](#)). Additionally, In an antisemitic attack in 2022 on the Grand Synagogue in the capital, an assailant wounded two police guards ([Al-Arabiya, 24 June 2022](#)).

Such attacks raise concern about the extent of radical Islam's influence persisting in the country. Over the last decade, thousands of Tunisians went abroad to join IS forces and other Islamic militant groups. Many of them have returned from Syria/Iraq or have joined IS cells or other groups closer to home. The lawlessness in neighboring Libya is creating opportunities for them to maintain an active presence. It is clear that despite a 2021 report stating that "Salafist-jihadist ideology has faded from view in the country, including among the most vulnerable sectors of the population, who tend to identify more with gang culture than with martyrdom" ([ICG, 4 June 2021](#)), the jihadist threat remains at large ([ISPI, 22 July 2022](#)) and forces Tunisian Christians to be careful in their activities and on social media.

Sub-Saharan African migrants

In July 2023, public unrest occurred in Sfax, the second most populous city after the capital Tunis, after a Tunisian man was killed following altercations between Sub-Saharan African migrants and Tunisians. Subsequently, the security services expelled hundreds of migrants from the city. Some were transferred to the desert border area with Libya, where around 100 migrants died or went missing. Many Sub-Saharan African migrants were subjected to racial hatred and physical abuse following an incendiary speech by President Saïd in February 2023, in which he accused those migrants of criminal activity and of posing a "demographic threat" ([France24, 17 September 2023](#)). Hostilities by both society and the security services towards Sub-Saharan African migrants continued in 2024, with tensions further increasing since the European Union concluded a deal with Tunisia in July 2023 to restrict migration to Europe ([Al Jazeera, 10 May 2024](#)).

Gender perspective

Nine women from an all-female group were sentenced for terrorist acts by the Criminal Chamber in Tunis in January 2023 ([Africa News, 12 January 2023](#)). The specific details of the charges and their implications were not provided in the report. Tunisian authorities disclosed that women made up about a third of the 3,000 Tunisians that travelled abroad to join IS in Syria and Libya, either of their own volition or via coercion but international reports suggest this number may be much higher than estimated ([HRW, 12 February 2019](#)).

Christian origins

Tunisia has a very rich Christian history. The first reports on Christianity in Tunisia concerned the interrogation and martyrdom in 203 AD of two Christian women, Felicitas and Perpetua, in the city of Carthage. In that same city, three very influential Church Fathers lived, worked and died, namely Tertullian (160-230 AD), Cyprian (210-258 AD) and Augustine (354-430 AD).

The early church of Tunis was at times severely persecuted by Rome, especially under Emperor Diocletian, who ruled from 284–305 AD. It was one of the places where the Donatist controversy erupted in the 4th century concerning the appointment of leaders who had previously betrayed their Christian faith during persecution. It seems that the Amazigh ('Berber') Christians were, generally speaking, less forgiving than the urbanized Romans in Tunisia.

In 439 AD Carthage was conquered by Germanic Vandals. The Vandals tried to convert the urban Christians of Africa to their Arian version of Christianity. The Vandals sent the Catholic clergy into exile and expropriated their churches, and at times had Catholic leaders killed. In 534 AD the Byzantine Empire - representatives of Rome and of 'non-heretical' Christian faith - captured Tunisia again.

The Byzantines rebuilt fortifications and border defences and entered into treaties with the Imazigen ('Berbers). Nevertheless, for many decades security and prosperity were precarious and were never fully restored. Direct Byzantine rule did not extend far beyond the coastal cities. In 698 AD, Arab armies defeated the Byzantine forces at the Battle of Carthage and destroyed it. As in other countries in North Africa, the arrival of Islam significantly affected Church development, but Christianity managed to survive in Tunisia until the 11th century.

Christianity did not succeed in getting firmly established again until the 19th century when many French and other expatriate Christians came to the country under the political protection of France. The Roman Catholic witness grew considerably and an archbishop of Carthage was installed in 1884. Various other Christian organizations also began work: Anglicans in 1829, the North African Mission in 1881, the Seventh-day Adventist in 1905, Methodists in 1908, and in 1911 Pentecostals from the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). After Tunisia's independence in 1956, the public life of the Church became more restricted; expatriates could worship without much difficulty but Tunisians converting from Islam to the Christian faith faced great opposition.

(For further details, see: Ross R K, Tadros M and Johnson T M (eds.), Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity. Christianity in North Africa and West Africa, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp.45-51)

Church spectrum today

Tunisia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	210	0.9
Catholic	18,300	78.5
Protestant	1,100	4.7
Independent	2,800	12.0
Unaffiliated	900	3.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	23,310	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	880	3.8
Pentecostal-Charismatic	2,400	10.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest officially recognized domination among the expatriate Christians in Tunisia. The Russian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as the French Protestant and the Anglican church are also officially recognized by the government. All denominations have functioning churches in the capital Tunis and are mainly serving expatriate Christians residing in the country.

Tunisian Christians from a Muslim background are not officially recognized and do not have officially recognized church buildings.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Tunisia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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