Why is the US selling weapons to Tunisia?

written by Elie Klutstein | 16.12.2024

Javelin anti-tank missiles, launchers, spare parts, and more: a small Middle Eastern country, led by a dictator who oppresses his people, will pay just over $100 million for American weapons, courtesy of Washington's foreign service.

As required by law, the US State Department sent a notification to Congress last week detailing the recently approved weapons deal with Tunisia, allowing Congress members to review it. The notice claimed the sale would improve Tunisia's defense capabilities and advance US interests in the region. The deal would not upset the Middle East's balance of power, the document stated, nor would it diminish America's wartime emergency reserves. It would add money to American coffers and create more jobs for Americans. Everyone, apparently, wins.

Tunisia – designated by the US a decade ago as a "major non-NATO ally" – is ruled through a system of oppression, silencing, and imprisonment, but this doesn't seem to trouble State Department officials as an obstacle to a possible agreement. How is it that officials who scrutinize every Israeli action in Gaza with seven pairs of eyes are not bothered by such a situation?

Tunisia's president is Kais Saied, 66, a constitutional law expert. He has ruled the country since 2019. Initially, things proceeded smoothly. The COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions sparked protests in 2021 over the government's poor performance, which prompted Saied to fire the prime minister, temporarily dissolve parliament – and take almost every possible authority for himself. Since then, the president has restricted freedom of expression, eliminated judicial oversight of himself and his appointed judges, and imprisoned his opponents and electoral rivals. He now rules the country unopposed.

Tunisia's last presidential election was held two months ago. Saied didn't even bother to present a platform but won easily with 90% of the votes, partly because he had imprisoned all his rivals. The leading candidate against him is currently serving three separate prison sentences, including one for 12 years. Eight other potential candidates were imprisoned or placed under house arrest. Others were disqualified from running. In the end, only two candidates were allowed to

participate in the actual election.

Less than 30% of Tunisia's eligible voters went to the polls. This minority is much larger than the voter turnout in parliamentary elections less than two years ago, which didn't even reach 10%. This grim reality reflects a bitter change that has occurred in the country within just a decade, a descent into dark oppression after great hope.

Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East. Young vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest of authorities' harassment and his dire economic situation sparked thousands to take to the streets. The massive demonstrations ended with the ouster of longtime President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled for about 24 years. He fled to Saudi Arabia, opening the way for a period of flourishing, prosperity, and democracy in Tunisia.

In fact, Tunisia was perhaps the only country to emerge from the Arab Spring mass protests on what at least then appeared to be a path toward establishing genuine democracy. Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen experienced revolutions, but their subsequent paths were very different.

But the reversal of trends in Tunisia over the past three years is even stranger, because at least officially – if one ignores opposition protests and low voter turnout – it was approved by referendum. Many residents believed the president's steps to restrict individual rights and political freedoms were necessary, given the country's difficult economic situation and political mood.

Despite concerned statements from the US and European Union, despite the persecution of candidates and the huge election gap – the White House hasn't really condemned Tunisia's government. The Biden administration's treatment of Saied is not similar, for example, to the US government's treatment of elections in Venezuela (which it declared "fraudulent") or to President Joe Biden's public criticism of election results in Georgia.

Moreover, the situation in Tunisia isn't stopping Americans from continuing to sell weapons and armaments to the local military there. So why does the State Department, which uses a special unit to monitor the use of American weapons by the IDF to determine if it is committing war crimes and thus restrict their sale to it, suddenly not express concern about selling weapons to an African dictator who has crushed the hopes of millions? How is Tunisia's case different?

Anger over vaccines

The US has maintained close ties with Tunisia for decades, since its independence in 1956 – long before the Arab Spring revolution. Due to its location in North Africa, it is considered a vital ally of both EU countries and the US. In 2012, it signed agreements to strengthen political and economic ties with countries north of it, and three years later, it gained status as a major non-NATO ally of the US.

Many Tunisians have always viewed America as the model superpower, and the EU was the main trading partner of the former French colony. The local military purchases weapons from European and US manufacturers and conducts joint exercises with their armed forces.

However, since Saied's rise to power, Tunisia's relations with the US are approaching a crossroads: Will Tunisia remain an ally of Western nations, or will it drift toward the opposing axis led by Russia, China, and Iran? And what will be decisive – security and economic interests or the state of human rights in Tunisia?

There are multiple reasons why Tunisia itself is distancing itself from the US. One is its traditional stance against what are considered "Western" values and against Israel in particular. Tunisia consistently adopts anti-Israeli or anti-Western positions. Tensions with the US intensified in the 1980s due to Israeli attacks on PLO camps in Tunisia and later due to American intervention in the First Gulf War. The Americans also complained that Tunisia showed too much leniency toward suspects in an attack on the US embassy in the country two decades later, in 2012.

President Saied, even before Operation Iron Swords began, refused to join the Abraham Accords and establish relations with Israel, despite the existence of a Jewish community in the country for hundreds of years. Since the war began, tension has developed between Tunisia and the US over American support for Israel and over the administration's refusal to use all tools at its disposal to pressure the IDF to end the war. Some analysts have argued that the damage caused by the situation may be irreparable.

There are other reasons for Tunisian disappointment with the Americans: Many there felt dismissal from the US, as if the country was good enough for fighting terrorism but doesn't receive good treatment in other areas. During the COVID crisis, the outbreak in Tunisia was among the worst in the world, and delays in

vaccine shipments from the US frustrated many in the country – especially when shipments of inferior Chinese vaccines arrived in many Arab countries whose relations with the Americans were cold enough for the Chinese taste.

Tunisian relations with Europe have largely focused on immigration issues in recent years. The expectation on the neighboring continent was that Tunisia – as a transit country from sub-Saharan regions to Europe – would make efforts to stop migrants on their way to the continent. In return, Europeans offered very little cooperation, including a $1 billion program in loans and grants. This may seem an enormous sum, but when compared to the $20 billion Europeans offered Tunisia in 2011, it's not large. Considering the massive effort required from Tunisia to stop the masses of migrants, the amount is considered insufficient.

The Tunisian approach to the West is partly related to the power struggle between world superpowers. China and Russia are trying to accumulate assets worldwide and gain political and economic footholds at the expense of the US and Europe. In this context, countries like Tunisia, sitting at geographical and economic crossroads, are valuable prizes. However, such countries understand that competition for their allegiance allows them to weigh the advantages of connecting with each side. In this case, Tunisia is weighing the benefits of its longstanding alliance with Europe and the US against the tempting possibilities inherent in deepening ties with China and Russia.

The Europeans have developed dependence on the Tunisians – both in trade between the country and the continent, though not a huge portion of their trade, and in fighting illegal immigration to their shores. This means Tunisians have leverage over Europeans, especially regarding immigration. The US also needs Tunisians to fight jihadist terrorism due to the country's influential geographical location in the Mediterranean region. This means Americans and Europeans must maneuver to maintain relations with Saied, even if they consider his actions problematic.

Moreover, the disadvantages of Tunisian defection to the Russian axis are even more severe. Tunisia would give Moscow an important foothold in the Mediterranean at a time when its main stronghold in Syria is becoming unstable. The Kremlin wants to establish military bases in strategic locations along African and Mediterranean coasts, trying to increase its influence and military prestige – and the Tunisians are using this desire as a tool to increase their bargaining

power with the Russians.

Meanwhile, as part of zigzagging between both sides, Tunisia announced abandoning negotiations with the International Monetary Fund over a large rescue package it desperately needs, and instead announced its intention to join BRICS, led by China, Iran, and Russia. This is an economic organization competing with the West, whose members include Brazil, Egypt, India, and South Africa. In President Saied's view, the loan guarantee conditions from the International Monetary Fund seemed like "foreign dictation" and an attempt at takeover, so he refused to accept them.

The courtship of BRICS may just be an effort to diversify Tunisia's economic support rather than an attempt to disconnect from its alliances with Western nations. The Tunisians have an interest in expanding relations with both sides, aiming to maintain flexibility in the long term.

Realpolitik

The US understands the trap it's in regarding Tunisia and is working to convince Saied to maintain good relations with the Western bloc. Dialogue with a dictator is always problematic, as he can defect and switch sides at any moment due to a simple whim.

Therefore, the Americans are trying to promote democratization programs in Tunisia, aiming to spark identification with liberal values and solidify its connection to the Western bloc. Opening Tunisia's economy to Western channels might also distance its leadership from Russia and China, given the need to operate according to certain economic codes. Thus, the Americans are working with Europeans to create economically beneficial relations with the Tunisians, trying to continue serving as an economic model for the African nation.

Another US course of action is promoting security cooperation. Besides using soft power to enhance America's power image, Washington ensures arming the Tunisians and making them develop military dependence on it. In recent years, the US went far, and as part of the special relationship with Tunisia as a non-NATO ally, it set a payment floor for military aid to the government: about $150 million annually. The payment floor was canceled only two years ago, a move expressing the Democratic administration's displeasure with the anti-democratic reform led by President Saied.

Besides this, the Americans maintained relations with the Tunisian military for counterterrorism purposes, while cultivating personal relationships with senior military officials. In parallel, the US worked to conduct training for internal security personnel in the country, aiming to promote democratic procedures in this field in Tunisia as well.

The American deliberation regarding President Saied stemmed partly from popular support for his actions among Tunisians: How can promoting liberal values exist contrary to what the people themselves want? How can the US promote democratization in a country whose population voted to restrict its own freedom?

This dilemma recalls what happened in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood's victory in the 2012 elections when Mohamed Morsi rose to power. What the Americans tried to do, attempting to prevent the continuation of anti-democratic steps in Tunisia, was to support programs that would not help the president advance his dictatorship. But now, due to the trend's continuation, the Americans need to decide again what to do: Should they cut aid funds, making Tunisia more exposed to terrorism and perhaps also joining the Russian-Chinese-Iranian axis? And how will the US continue supporting Tunisia's army, which has recently become increasingly political?

Meanwhile, it seems the Americans – or at least the State Department – aren't letting concerns about democracy's deterioration in Tunisia stand in their way. Anti-tank missiles are considered defensive weapons that cannot harm the local population or be used for offensive atrocities. In any case, the Americans will certainly exercise extra caution regarding their relations with the Tunisians, but for now, they are not expected to alienate or sever them. Donald Trump's presidency won't change the trend, as individual rights in Tunisia seem more important, specifically to the Democratic Party in the US.

One can also note that this is a good example of realpolitik that sometimes characterizes Democrats in US foreign relations. Officials in Washington don't base their foreign policy only on noble values, and not infrequently, they "get their hands dirty" in relations with dictators trying to advance American interests worldwide.

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