



HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

“We Are Living on Borrowed Time”

Repression of Civil Society in Tunisia



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Summary

Fifteen years after protests in Tunisia sparked the 2011 Arab uprising and gave rise to a flourishing civil society, President Kais Saied grabbed power on July 25, 2021, kicking off a slide back into authoritarianism. Since then, the president has consolidated power and replaced the 2014 Constitution. He severely undermined the separation of powers by weakening parliament and eroding the independence of the judiciary. Government repression has targeted political opposition and independent voices, with authorities intimidating, arbitrarily detaining, prosecuting, and convicting critics for exercising their human rights.

Since May 2024, Saied and his government have systematically cracked down on civil society, threatening to collapse one of the last pillars of participation in public affairs in the country. Collectively, these actions amount to an attempt to shutter civil society in Tunisia.

This report documents the Tunisian authorities' escalating repression of local and international civil society organizations and their members, as authorities target them with arbitrary arrests and detention, financial and criminal investigations, arbitrary suspensions, and moves to tighten the legislative framework governing associations and restrict the right to freedom of association.

The implications for people's rights are severe, including on their ability to take part in public affairs and freedom of association as well as to participate in freedom of expression. Civil society organizations in Tunisia also play a key role in offering legal aid, monitoring prisons and places of detention, and providing access to protection or shelter, all of which are at risk. By prosecuting non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, imprisoning or forcing them into exile, and dismantling civil society groups, the authorities are ensuring that no one is left to hold them to account, with devastating consequences for the realization of human rights and the protections civil society has long fought for.

Since 2022, President Saied has increasingly demonized civil society and NGOs, portraying them as a threat to national sovereignty and security and as interfering in the country's internal affairs to serve foreign powers. He has threatened to suspend foreign

funding for associations and accused their leaders of being “traitors” and “mercenaries.” Such rhetoric undermines and stigmatizes the work of civil society actors, putting them at risk of retaliation.

In total, authorities have prosecuted at least 47 people connected to NGOs, including members, employees, and former employees. At least 14 have been convicted and sentenced to prison terms, including a prominent defender who was sentenced to eight years in prison and a heavy fine based on abusive charges of financial crimes on March 19, 2026.

Arbitrary detention for the exercise of fundamental rights has become commonplace in Tunisia. Tunisian authorities have systematically used pre-trial detention against critics and human rights defenders, often holding them for more than 14 months before trial, the maximum period permitted under Tunisian law. At least eight NGO workers have been arbitrarily detained in connection with their organizations’ work and held in preventive detention for more than 14 months. Five were released in late 2025 and early 2026 but were convicted on abusive charges of harboring foreigners entering Tunisia irregularly in connection with their work and the mandates of their legally registered associations.

The authorities have criminalized and cracked down on aid to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants by weaponizing vague legal provisions that criminalize assisting or harboring people without regularized immigration status, including the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents and the 1968 Law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia.

In addition to targeting and shutting down organizations providing support to migrants and asylum seekers, the authorities in June 2024 instructed the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, to suspend the processing of asylum applications. As Tunisia still lacks a national asylum system, the government’s actions have left asylum seekers in legal limbo without access to international protection, exposing them to risks of arbitrary arrest and expulsion.

Authorities have also broadly interpreted provisions of the Counterterrorism and Money Laundering Law and of the Law Combating Illicit Enrichment to justify charges against human rights defenders, without apparent evidence of financial misconduct.

Many associations, whose leaders have also been targeted with arrests and prosecution, have ceased their activities since 2024. In some cases, they faced additional difficulties

and found themselves in debt because they were unable to carry out certain transactions due to banking restrictions.

Authorities, including the Tax Evasion Investigation and Prevention Brigade (BILEF) created in 2017 to combat illicit financial flows, have also targeted associations with mass financial and criminal investigations. At the end of 2024, shortly before the presidential election, the BILEF notified at least a dozen associations that it had opened investigations into them. Subsequently, authorities opened other financial and criminal investigations into organizations such as the Tunisian office of the organization Legal Agenda and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights.

These investigations, some of which have been ongoing for nearly two years at time of writing, appear to be unfounded and abusive, intended to intimidate and stifle civil society. The widespread and systematic use of such investigations against a broad swathe of civil society raises serious concerns that the government is weaponizing such processes to target and intimidate civil society organizations. The ongoing investigations are an administrative and operational burden for associations and have already resulted in the freezing of at least two associations' bank accounts.

Relying on Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations, a Tunis court also temporarily suspended many associations between July and October 2025 and between April and May 2026. Human Rights Watch identified at least 20 suspended associations; however, it is impossible to determine the exact number of associations affected without official data.

These suspensions appear to be arbitrary, intended to intimidate and silence civil society actors. They have circumvented due process and have been marred by irregularities. Some associations did not receive the formal warnings required by law which would enable them to respond or remedy. Others attempted to respond to allegations of violations but did not receive a reply from the administration. Suspensions are a drastic measure that should only be taken as a last resort with clear justification.

According to lawyers who provided support to suspended groups, about 30 associations that appealed their suspension had their appeals dismissed. The suspended associations face serious risk of dissolution once all avenues of appeal have been exhausted. At least

two associations are facing dissolution proceedings before the Tunis Court of First Instance as of August 2026.

The suspensions appear to be part of the Tunisian authorities' campaign to dismantle civil society one suspension order at a time, immobilizing organizations that have for decades defended human rights and access to justice. The judiciary, which orders these suspensions, has been under the control of the executive since measures undertaken by Kais Saied in 2022. Saied dismantled the High Judicial Council, undermining its independence, and unilaterally promulgated two decree-laws granting him extensive powers to dismiss judges and intervene in their careers.

The banks have also imposed unwarranted restrictions on the banking transactions of organizations, such as removing access to hard currency or convertible dinar accounts, blocking or returning foreign funds sent to Tunisian accounts, or closing bank accounts. Associations in Tunisia have also reported restrictions on their activities, including denial of accreditation for election observation, more stringent regulations, and a ban on some public events.

The authorities have repeatedly sought to replace and tighten the current legislative framework governing associations, which could seriously undermine the right to freedom of association in Tunisia. Two bills, one leaked in early 2022 and the other submitted to parliament in October 2023, would replace the 2011 Decree-Law 88 on associations by introducing provisions giving the government significant control and oversight over the establishment, activities, operations, and funding of independent groups.

The authorities should end their crackdown on civil society and instead respect and protect space for civic groups to operate fully and freely. They should stop restricting freedom of association and end abusive investigations, judicial harassment, and criminalization of civil society groups' work and members, particularly in connection with asylum work. They should release all NGO workers, activists, and human rights defenders arbitrarily detained in connection with their legitimate work and overturn unjust convictions.

The Justice Ministry should stop using preventive detention to keep NGO workers and human rights defenders behind bars for peaceful activism. It should direct prosecutors not to use abusive laws to prosecute people for their legitimate work with associations or solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.

Parliament should ensure that associations can operate freely, including by withdrawing draft associations laws that would violate the right to freedom of association and repealing all decree-laws unilaterally issued by President Kais Saied which undermine the independence of the judiciary.

The international community and Tunisia's partners, including the European Union and its member states, should privately and publicly urge Tunisian authorities to release all NGO workers, human rights defenders, activists, and others arbitrarily detained, overturn convictions in connection with legitimate work of associations, and end the crackdown on civil society.

Recommendations

To the Tunisian Government

- End unlawful restrictions on freedom of association, assembly, expression, and the press.
- Ensure that associations can operate without political interference, intimidation, harassment, or undue restrictions.
- Respect and protect space for civil society groups to operate fully and freely without fear of reprisals: cease restricting, prohibiting, or unduly surveilling the activities of civil society actors and refrain from intimidating or taking punitive legal action against associations, their members, or their staff.
- Stop criminalizing the work of civil society groups and members, particularly those critical of the government and groups providing aid to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.
- Authorize UNHCR to continue processing asylum applications and instruct law enforcement and security forces to halt immigration-related arrests, detention, and expulsions of refugees and asylum seekers.
- Stop using counterterrorism and money laundering legislation to target peaceful human rights defenders, activists, and NGO workers.
- Provide full and adequate reparations to individuals wrongfully detained.
- Refrain from amending Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations to give overbroad authority to the government, introduce undue restrictions on associations, or restrict the right to freedom of association.
- Instruct private banks not to unjustly and unduly restrict funding of associations or other routine banking transactions.
- In line with Tunisia's standing invitation, accept all the pending country visit requests by and facilitate the visits of UN Special Rapporteurs, including by the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and the Working Group on arbitrary detention.
- Implement the rulings of African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and reverse Tunisia's withdrawal of its declaration under Article 34(6) of the Protocol to the African Charter, which prevents individuals and NGOs from bringing cases against Tunisia before the Court.

To the Ministry of Justice

- Stop all forms of judicial and administrative harassment of civil society groups and members for their legitimate work, including baseless investigations, unfounded prosecutions, arbitrary travel bans, asset freezes, burdensome administrative requirements, and other retaliatory measures targeting associations or individuals.
- Release all NGO workers, activists, human rights defenders, and others arbitrarily detained in connection with their legitimate work and the exercise of their human rights. Overturn their convictions.
- Direct prosecutors not to use the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents and the 1968 law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia to prosecute people for asylum-related work or humanitarian aid to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, including those without regular status in Tunisia.
- Instruct judges to comply with domestic and international law regarding procedures of suspension and dissolution of associations, and to provide associations with an opportunity to remedy any alleged infringement of the association's law.
- Stop using preventive detention as a general practice and only resort to it in exceptional cases as mandated by international and Tunisian law.
- Guarantee quick, automatic, and regular independent judicial review of each person detained, including in preventive detention. Ensure all detainees are promptly brought before a judge or judicial panel within 48 hours to determine the legality and necessity of their detention and to order their immediate release if detention is not lawful or justified.
- Ensure that the General Directorate of Prisons and Rehabilitation guarantees humane conditions of detention, including minimum standards of hygiene, adequate cell space and bedding, adequate food and safe drinking water, and adequate access to health care, including regular access to medical examination, specialized care, and psychosocial support for detainees. Provide redress for detainees who have experienced ill-treatment or who have been denied adequate medical care or mental health services.
- Investigate and hold to account those responsible for racist attacks and abuses, including online and by state affiliated agents.

To Parliament

- Withdraw the draft law on associations submitted in October 2023 which would violate the right to freedom of association.
- Amend the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents and the 1968 law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia to remove any criminalization of asylum support or humanitarian aid to foreign nationals without regularized immigration status in Tunisia.

To the International Community

- Privately and publicly urge Tunisian authorities to release all NGO workers, human rights defenders, activists, and others arbitrarily detained, to overturn convictions in connection with organizations' legitimate work or peaceful activities, and to stop targeting independent civil society groups.
- Urge Tunisian authorities, including at international and regional fora such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Union Assembly, the European Union, and the United Nations Human Rights Council to protect freedom of association, assembly, expression, and the press, and to end their crackdown on civic space.
- Press the government to drop any plan to amend Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations which would undermine the right to freedom of association.
- Systematically send monitors and observers, through embassies or local missions, to the court proceedings of those arbitrarily detained or abusively prosecuted by the authorities.
- Conduct a review of international cooperation with Tunisian authorities to ensure it is tied to compliance with international human rights obligations and contributes to secure concrete, structural, and timebound human rights progress and reforms in Tunisia.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch conducted interviews with twelve NGO workers, five lawyers, three family members of detained or formerly detained people, and a journalist between October 2024 and May 2026, either in person in Tunis or by telephone. Human Rights Watch reviewed judicial documents, notices of summons and investigations, open-source information, and relevant laws, bills, and practices, and also attended a trial of NGO workers in November 2025.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic or French. Human Rights Watch explained the purpose of the interviews to interviewees and obtained informed consent to use the information provided for this report. Human Rights Watch did not pay interviewees.

All names included in this report are published with the express permission of detainees, their families, or lawyers. Any pseudonyms or withheld identities are noted in the footnotes.

Many of the cases involving individuals or associations documented in this report are ongoing and details are current as of July 2026 time of writing.

Human Rights Watch sent letters, annexed to this report, to the Presidency of the Government Directorate General for Associations, Parliament, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Justice to request additional information on July 21, 2026 but did not receive a response.

Background

Tunisia's former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in power between 1987 and 2011, imposed a sham registration system for associations, frequently denying legal recognition to independent human rights, political, and labor associations. Authorities imprisoned thousands of Tunisians under provisions of the associations law which penalized belonging to or serving unrecognized or dissolved associations.¹

After the 2011 revolution and the fall of Ben Ali's dictatorship, Tunisian civil society flourished. The transitional government adopted new legislation on associations in September 2011 in line with international standards. The law allowed any individual, Tunisian or foreign resident, to freely establish a civil society organization, engage in a wide range of activities, advocate with the authorities on laws and policies, and speak publicly about the organization's activities and views.²

Many associations were founded across a wide range of areas, including sectors where their work was crucial to compensate for shortcomings of the state. A dynamic civil society emerged, participating in public policymaking and striving for democratic transition. There were approximately 9,000 associations registered in Tunisia before 2011,³ but more than 25,000 at the end of February 2026.⁴ It is, however, difficult to determine the number of associations active at time of writing.

Since President Kais Saied's election in 2019, authorities have gradually undermined civil society, starting with restrictions on access to information.⁵ As President Saied consolidated power, he imposed major legislative changes, including drafting a new

¹ Human Rights Watch, *Tunisia's Repressive Laws: The Reform Agenda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/12/16/tunisiass-repressive-laws/reform-agenda#284>.

² Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of September 24, 2011, relating to associations, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-loi-n-2011-88-du-24-septembre-2011-relatif-aux-associations/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

³ Diane Robert, "Une société civile tunisienne formatée," *Nawaat*, June 13, 2016, <https://nawaat.org/2016/06/13/une-societe-civile-tunisienne-formatee/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁴ Public Center for Information, Training, Studies, and Documentation on Associations (IFEDA), accessed April 5, 2026, <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/>.

⁵ "Le SNJT condamne la politique de «Black-out» de la Présidence de la République," *L'Economiste Maghrebin*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2019/12/26/snjt-condamne-politique-black-out-presidence-republique/> (accessed April 13, 2026).

constitution without consulting civil society groups.⁶ He severely undermined the separation of powers by weakening parliament and eroding the independence of the judiciary.⁷ Authorities increasingly targeted civil society, stigmatizing it and attempting to delegitimize its work amid a deepening crackdown on civil liberties.⁸ And government repression has targeted the opposition and independent voices, intimidating, prosecuting, convicting, and arbitrarily detaining critics for exercising their human rights.⁹

Since May 2024, Saïed and his government have systematically cracked down on civil society, threatening to collapse one of the last pillars of participation in public affairs in the country.¹⁰ This escalating repression toward civil society organizations and their members includes arbitrary arrests and detention, financial and criminal investigations, suspensions of associations, arbitrary banking restrictions, and proposals to tighten legal frameworks in ways that restrict the right to freedom of association.

Demonization of Civil Society

Since at least 2022, authorities, including at the highest levels of government, have widely demonized civil society organizations in public discourse, building a climate of intimidation against them that has accompanied the crackdown. President Saïed has repeatedly accused associations of serving foreign interests and interfering in Tunisia's internal affairs.¹¹ Such messaging has contributed to a climate of fear and intimidation within civil society, isolated civil society actors, and undermined the crucial work of organizations.

⁶ “Q&A: Tunisia’s Constitutional Referendum,” Human Rights Watch Q&A, July 14, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/14/qa-tunisia-constitutional-referendum>.

⁷ “Tunisia: President Intensifies Attacks on Judicial Independence,” Human Rights Watch news release, February 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/27/tunisia-president-intensifies-attacks-judicial-independence>.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *“All Conspirators”: How Tunisia Uses Arbitrary Detention to Crush Dissent* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/04/16/all-conspirators/how-tunisia-uses-arbitrary-detention-crush-dissent#1595>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Laure-Maïssa Farjallah, “Idéologiquement, Kaïs Saïed refuse les corps intermédiaires et les contre-pouvoirs,” *L’Orient le Jour*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1425954/-ideologiquement-kais-saied-refuse-les-corps-intermediaires-et-les-contre-pouvoirs-.html> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹¹ Haifa Mzalouat and Mathilde Warda, “‘Civil Society’ in the crosshairs of Kaïs Saïed,” *Inkyfada*, March 15, 2022, <https://inkyfada.com/en/2022/03/15/kais-saied-threat-civil-society-tunisia/> (accessed March 20, 2026); “Civil Society: Threats of dismantling and demonization,” Inkyfada podcast, March 9, 2022, <https://inkyfada.com/en/podcast/inkytalk-english/3-civil-society-threats-of-dismantling-and-demonization/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

On February 24, 2022, during a cabinet meeting, President Saïed vehemently attacked associations without naming any specific group. He claimed that they are extensions of foreign powers and said he “rejects foreign funding to associations intended to meddle with the Tunisian state and to conduct electoral campaigns.” Saïed announced an intention to ban all foreign funding of these organizations and accused them of money laundering.¹² Domestic funding for civil society is scarce and Tunisian associations often rely on foreign funding to sustain their activities, including to pursue legitimate human rights work.

On November 24, 2023, President Saïed said foreign funding of associations posed a threat to Tunisia's sovereignty. He claimed, without providing evidence, that an unnamed Tunisian association based abroad received millions of Tunisian dinars each year and transferred them illegally to finance political parties.¹³ Direct or indirect foreign funding of political parties is prohibited under Tunisian law.¹⁴ Saïed said “associations receiving foreign funds meet in 5-star hotels only, and always at the end of the week for rest and recreation.”¹⁵

On May 7, 2024, during a national security council meeting, President Saïed accused NGO workers providing aid to refugees and migrants of being “traitors” and “mercenaries” facilitating “the settlement of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia.”¹⁶ He claimed associations received large amounts of money from abroad and called on the Tunisian Financial Analysis Commission (CTAF), the unit responsible for combating terrorism and money laundering at the Central Bank, “to take action.”¹⁷

On September 16, 2024, during a meeting with the governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia, President Saïed said two unnamed associations were examples of organizations funded

¹² Speech of President Kais Saïed, Facebook page of the Tunisian Presidency, February 24, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=959141931436749> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹³ Speech of President Kais Saïed, Facebook page of the Tunisian Presidency, November 24, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/videos/723173159719890/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁴ Decree-Law No. 2011-87 of September 24, 2011, on organizing political parties, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-loi-n-2011-87-du-24-septembre-2011-organisant-les-partis-politiques/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁵ Speech of President Kais Saïed, Facebook page of the Tunisian Presidency, November 24, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/videos/723173159719890/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁶ Speech of President Kais Saïed speech, Facebook page of the Tunisian Presidency, May 7, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3838758239713948> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁷ Ibid.

from abroad for political maneuvering. He called for the CTAF to impose stricter controls on financing.¹⁸

Members of parliament have echoed President Saied's narrative by claiming foreign funding of associations is a threat to national sovereignty and security and calling for the legislative framework governing associations to be amended more restrictively.¹⁹

At the same time, anti-association campaigns targeting associations and NGOs receiving foreign funding have proliferated on social media since 2022, often from pro-government accounts. They have called on authorities to ban foreign funding and shut down these organizations' offices in Tunisia.²⁰ Human Rights Watch reviewed dozens of such posts on platforms including Facebook and TikTok.

While combatting money laundering and terrorism are legitimate objectives, they should not be used as pretexts to control or prohibit foreign funding for civil society organizations by requiring prior approval. Under article 38 of the Guidelines on Freedom of Association and Assembly in Africa, governments may neither impose blanket bans on foreign funding for civil society organizations nor subject foreign funding to government authorization. The guidelines reflect the provisions of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, to which Tunisia is a state party.²¹

Tunisian authorities have not publicly provided material evidence for their claims of improper financing to organizations. A Human Rights Watch review of charges brought against civil society organizations and their employees in Tunisia have overwhelmingly found them to be abusive and without merit.²²

¹⁸ Tunisian Presidency statement, Facebook page of the Tunisian Presidency, September 17, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/posts/927240276101240?ref=embed_post (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁹ "Le financement étranger, le point le plus problématique du projet de loi sur les associations," *Radio Express FM*, May 7, 2024, <https://radioexpressfm.com/fr/actualites/le-financement-etranger-le-point-le-plus-problematique-du-projet-de-loi-sur-les-associations/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

²⁰ Human Rights Watch reviewed dozens of Facebook posts and TikTok videos calling for a ban on foreign funding and associating the work of civil society with foreign interference.

²¹ African Commission on Human and People's Rights, "Guidelines on Freedom of Association and Assembly in Africa," <https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/ACHPR-Guidelines-english.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2026).

²² See below, "Arbitrary Arrests and Detention."

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has found that hostile narratives increasingly used to vilify and criminalize civil society “deepen the stigmatization of those exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and association” and lead to the denial of fundamental rights, especially when the narrative is propagated by authorities. “Stigmatization of civil society, civic mobilization and activism often have a severe and lasting ‘chilling effect,’ not only on directly affected individuals and groups, but also a detrimental impact on civic space broadly.”²³

²³ UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, “Protecting the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association from stigmatization,” A/79/263, July 31, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a79263-protecting-rights-freedom-peaceful-assembly-and-association> (accessed April 15, 2025), paras. 11, 14.

Arbitrary Arrests and Detention

Between May and December 2024, Tunisian authorities heavily targeted associations with arbitrary arrests and detention of their members, staff, former staff, and people with a professional affiliation with them. In total, authorities have prosecuted at least 47 people in connection with NGO work during this period. At least 14 have been convicted and sentenced to prison terms.

Authorities detained at least 10 people, including eight workers at organizations providing aid to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, or fighting racism and discrimination, charging them under abusive legal provisions that criminalize assistance to foreigners without regularized immigration status as well as under the counterterrorism and money laundering law. Seven of them were released following trials in 2025 and 2026 but were convicted for “harboring individuals entering or leaving Tunisia irregularly” and/or “facilitating irregular entry or stay” of foreigners in Tunisia under the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents and/or the 1968 Law on the Status of Foreigners. Antiracism activist Saadia Mosbah was sentenced to eight years in prison on unfounded financial charges on March 19.²⁴ The same day, human rights defender Saloua Ghrissa was provisionally released pending trial.²⁵ All ten had been held in pretrial detention for longer than 14 months, the maximum time permitted under Tunisian law.²⁶

The 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents, amended multiple times between 1998 and 2024, punishes any person who has harbored foreigners entering or leaving Tunisian territory irregularly with up to four years imprisonment. The 1968 Law on the Status of Foreigners punishes anyone who assisted, directly or indirectly, in the irregular entry, exit, or stay of a foreign national in Tunisia with up to a year in prison.²⁷ Tunisian authorities

²⁴ Human Rights Watch news release, “Tunisia: Harsh Sentences for Rights Defenders,” July 7, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/07/07/tunisia-harsh-sentences-for-rights-defenders>.

²⁵ “L’activiste Saloua Ghrissa libérée,” Mosaïque FM, March 19, 2026, <https://www.mosaïquefm.net/fr/national-tunisie/1509575/l-activiste-saloua-ghrissa-liberee> (accessed April 7, 2026).

²⁶ Under article 85 of the Penal Procedure Code, <https://www.droit-afrique.com/upload/doc/tunisie/Tunisie-Code-2010-procedure-penale.pdf> (accessed March 202, 2026).

²⁷ Law on Passports and Travel Documents of 1975; Law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia of 1968.

have used this and other vague provisions in the law to criminalize any form of assistance to migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees and to restrict freedom of association.²⁸

In a 2025 report, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended Tunisia review its legislative framework, in particular the 1968 Law on the Status of Foreigners and the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents, to ensure an open space for civil society organizations, including those working with ethnic minority groups, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. It found that “the arbitrary interpretation of the overly broad and vague concepts and provisions in the legislative framework to combat trafficking in persons, particularly those that criminalize the provision of assistance and shelter to persons in an irregular situation” restrict the rights to freedom of expression and association, arbitrarily silence human rights defenders and civil society groups, and “allow for targeted application against the operations and activities...working to promote the rights of non-citizens, particularly sub-Saharan migrants.”²⁹

In addition to laws criminalizing assistance to foreigners with irregular immigration status, the authorities have relied on the 2015 counterterrorism and money laundering law to arrest and bring financial charges against some of the detained NGO workers. The legislation allows authorities to hold a suspect in custody for up to 15 days without being brought before a judge and denies them access to legal counsel for the first 48 hours.³⁰

Human Rights Watch has previously documented how Tunisian authorities have turned arbitrary detention into a cornerstone of their repressive policy, increasingly relying on arbitrary detention and politically motivated prosecutions to intimidate, punish, and silence critics, including within civil society, based on many cases brought under the counterterrorism and money laundering legislation.³¹

²⁸ “La criminalisation de la solidarité envers les migrants en Tunisie,” FTDES joint statement, March 24, 2023, <https://ftdes.net/fr/la-criminalisation-de-la-solidarite-envers-les-migrants-en-tunisie/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

²⁹ UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, “Concluding observations on the combined twentieth to twenty-second periodic reports of Tunisia,” CERD/C/TUN/CO/20-22, December 23, 2025, <http://docs.un.org/CERD/C/TUN/CO/20-22> (accessed March 20, 2026).

³⁰ Organic Law No. 2015-26 of August 7, 2015, on the Fight Against Terrorism and the Repression of Money Laundering, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/loi-organique-n-2015-26-du-7-aout-2015-relative-a-la-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-et-a-la-repression-du-blanchiment-dargent/> (accessed March 4, 2025).

³¹ Human Rights Watch, “*All Conspirators*”: How Tunisia Uses Arbitrary Detention to Crush Dissent (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/04/16/all-conspirators/how-tunisia-uses-arbitrary-detention-crush-dissent>.

The Tunisian Council for Refugees

Among the organizations whose work assisting refugees has been criminalized is the Tunisian Council for Refugees, a national non-governmental organization formed in 2016 “to contribute to efforts to protect refugees and asylum seekers.”³² It has been a key partner of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tunisia, primarily responsible for the collection and initial screening of asylum applications. The council also provided other services to support UNHCR’s mandate, including arranging emergency accommodation and medical assistance for refugees and asylum seekers.³³

In February 2023, President Saïed made comments linking undocumented Black African migrants to a “criminal plan” to change Tunisia’s demographics, fueling a surge in attacks against Black Africans in Tunisia and exacerbating abuses by security forces.³⁴ The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called President Saïed’s speech racist and found that such remarks violated the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to which Tunisia is a state party.³⁵



Copy of the Tunisian Council for Refugees' call for tenders to Tunisian hotels, which led to the arrests and prosecutions of its members.

³² “Tunisian Council for Refugees,” Facebook, accessed March 20, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/ctrefugees/?locale=fr_FR.

³³ “Tunisia: Deepening Civil Society Crackdown,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 17, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/17/tunisia-deepening-civil-society-crackdown>.

³⁴ “Tunisia: Racist Violence Targets Black Migrants, Refugees,” Human Rights news release, March 10, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/10/tunisia-racist-violence-targets-black-migrants-refugees>.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024), Tunisia chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/tunisia#284910>.

On May 2, 2024, the Tunisian Council for Refugees published a public tender for Tunisian hotels to provide services for its beneficiaries,³⁶ sparking backlash on social media and among parliament members amid the anti-migrant crackdown.³⁷

On May 3, 2024, police raided their headquarters in Tunis, shut down the organization, and arrested its founder and director, Mustapha Djemali. The next day, police arrested the Council's project manager, Abderrazak Krimi. On May 7, a court spokesperson said the public prosecutor's office had accused the heads of an unnamed organization, clearly the Council, of "forming a criminal association with the aim of helping people to enter Tunisia" illegally in connection with a "call for tenders to Tunisian hotel establishments for the accommodation of African migrants" published "without coordination with the security and administrative authorities."³⁸

That day, an investigative judge ordered Djemali and Krimi detained pending investigation under articles 38, 39, and 41 of Law No. 40 of 1975 on Passports and Travel Documents for having "provided information, planned, facilitated or assisted...the illegal entry or exit of a person from the Tunisian territory," "harbored persons entering or leaving Tunisian territory illegally," and participated "in an organization or entente" to commit these offenses.³⁹ Between May and June 2024, the authorities also froze the bank accounts of the Council, Djemali, and Krimi.⁴⁰

After a hearing held in March 2025, Djemali's family said that the investigative judge told one of the accused, "You brought Black people into our country illegally, you gave them food and shelter, the history and laws of Tunisia will make you pay for it."⁴¹

³⁶ "L'hébergement des Subsahariens dans les hôtels fait couler beaucoup d'encre!," *African Manager*, May 3, 2024, <https://africanmanager.com/lhebergement-des-subsahariens-dans-les-hotels-fait-couler-beaucoup-dencre/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

³⁷ "Tunisia: No Safe Haven for Black African Migrants, Refugees," Human Rights Watch news release, July 19, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/19/tunisia-no-safe-haven-black-african-migrants-refugees>.

³⁸ "السجن لرئيس جمعية ونائبه إثر نشر طلب عروض لإيواء مهاجرين بنزل," *Mosaïque FM*, May 7, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/zwfuk8nj> (accessed March 20, 2026).

³⁹ Law No. 75-40 of May 14, 1975, relating to passports and travel documents, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/loi-n-75-40-du-14-mai-1975-relative-aux-passeports-et-aux-documents-de-voyage/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of Djemali's lawyers (name withheld), Tunisia, October 23, 2025.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with two members of Djemali's family (names withheld), Tunisia, October 23, 2025; Summary document outlining the case and its developments, on file with Human Rights Watch.

On April 30, 2025, an investigative judge closed the investigation to formally charge Djemali, Krimi, and four other employees.⁴² On June 3, the Indictment Chamber expanded the charges to include article 42 of the Law on Passports and Travel Documents, which alone carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison if “the offenses are considered to be committed within the framework of an organization or entente.”⁴³ In total, the defendants faced up to 23 years in prison.

Human Rights Watch reviewed the judge’s closing order and found the charges to be based solely on the legitimate work of the Council, which operated legally in Tunisia and was almost exclusively funded by UNHCR, a partner organization of the government.⁴⁴

Although the Council’s beneficiaries were asylum seekers and refugees registered with UNHCR in Tunisia, the investigative judge found its activities to constitute supporting migrants without regular status “to ensure their settlement in the country.” The closing order refers to the Council’s activities such as providing accommodation and cash assistance to refugees and asylum seekers, which are standard UNHCR activities in many countries and often carried out by implementing partners.⁴⁵

Five of the defendants went to trial starting October 16, 2025, while a sixth initiated proceedings before the Court of Cassation. On November 24, the Tunis Court of First Instance convicted Djemali and Krimi of harboring individuals entering or leaving Tunisia illegally and sentenced them to two years in prison, including six months suspended. They were released that day after 19 months in pretrial detention. The other three defendants were acquitted.⁴⁶ On May 13, 2026, the Tunis Court of Appeal confirmed the verdict issued by the court of first instance.⁴⁷

⁴² Under articles 38, 39, and 41 of the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents amended by Law 2004-6 of February 3, 2004.

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with one of Djemali’s lawyers (name withheld), Tunisia, October 23, 2025.

⁴⁴ “Tunisia: Abusive Prosecutions of Refugee Group,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 24, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/24/tunisia-abusive-prosecutions-of-refugee-group>.

⁴⁵ “Cash-based interventions,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/respond-emergencies/cash-based-interventions>.

⁴⁶ “Tunisia: Abusive Prosecutions of Refugee Group,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 24, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/24/tunisia-abusive-prosecutions-of-refugee-group>; Human Rights Watch interview with one of Djemali’s lawyers (name withheld), Tunisia, November 24, 2025.

⁴⁷ “Tunisia: End Abusive Prosecution of Refugee Aid Workers,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 11, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/05/11/tunisia-end-abusive-prosecution-of-refugee-aid-workers>

Djemali, an 83-year-old Swiss-Tunisian national, was heard only once by the investigative judge during his pretrial detention.⁴⁸ He has Horton's disease, an inflammation of the arteries, and from September 2024 until his release in November 2025, prison authorities did not provide him with adequate medication despite several requests and denied six requests for provisional release, his family said.⁴⁹ Due to a freeze on his bank account, he has been unable to access his retirement pension since his imprisonment and is facing economic hardship.⁵⁰

Since May 2024, the council has ceased all activities; its frozen account meant it was unable to pay employees, service providers, rent, or electricity bills, which resulted in significant debt.⁵¹

Terre d'Asile Tunisie

Amid the anti-migrant crackdown, the authorities have targeted Terre d'Asile Tunisie (Land of Asylum Tunisia), a branch of the French NGO Terre d'Asile, established in Tunisia in 2012 to promote the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, unaccompanied minors, and victims of human trafficking living in Tunisia. The group provided legal and social assistance to migrants and refugees, and capacity building for civil society groups.⁵²

Terre d'Asile Tunisie worked in partnership with national and local authorities, including UNHCR and the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), within the framework of monitored and audited official agreements.⁵³

After President Saeid's anti-migrant speech of February 2023 and security forces' increased abuses against migrants and refugees, including use of excessive force, arbitrary arrests and

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with two members of Djemali's family (names withheld), October 23, 2025.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with two members of Djemali's family (names withheld), May 6, 2026.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of Djemali's lawyers (name withheld), April 30, 2026.

⁵² France Terre d'Asile, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.france-terre-asile.org/nos-actions/maisons-tunisienne-du-droit-et-des-migrations>.

⁵³ Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, "Trois membres de France Terre d'asile sont emprisonnés à tort en Tunisie: libérez-les!," *Libération*, May 27, 2025, https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/tribunes/trois-membres-de-france-terre-dasile-sont-emprisonnes-a-tort-en-tunisie-liberez-les-20250527_RIXNAZBCEBBV3DEDF76QRP6JLM/ (accessed March 20, 2026).

detention, and collective expulsions,⁵⁴ Terre d'Asile Tunisie was at the forefront of providing assistance and protection to those who suffered abuses or were at risk.

Between May 7 and 13, 2024, security forces arrested a former director of the NGO, Sherifa Riahi, as well as the director and the administrative and financial director at the time. A judge ordered the three of them detained on May 16. Three other employees were also placed under judicial supervision. The authorities searched the NGO's offices in Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse that same month.⁵⁵ Terre d'Asile Tunisie has since shut down its activities.

Separately, authorities also arrested a former mayor of the city of Sousse and a former deputy mayor, Imen Ouardani, on May 11, 2024. The investigating judge said he considered them accomplices of the Terre d'Asile employees.⁵⁶

Judicial authorities held all five detainees in pretrial detention and prosecuted them on charges of “harboring individuals entering Tunisia illegally,” and “participation in an organization or entente” to commit this offense, in addition to “assisting, directly or indirectly, in the irregular entry or stay of a foreign national in Tunisia.” The charges were solely for the association's work providing critical assistance to refugees and migrants based on its programs providing support services and emergency accommodation to refugees and migrants.⁵⁷

In total, 23 people were prosecuted in this case, including six employees or former staff of the NGO and 17 elected officials or employees of the Sousse municipality. The city council

⁵⁴ “Tunisia: No Safe Haven for Black African Migrants, Refugees,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 19, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/19/tunisia-no-safe-haven-black-african-migrants-refugees>.

⁵⁵ Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, “Trois membres de France Terre d’asile sont emprisonnés à tort en Tunisie : libérez-les!,” *Libération*, May 27, 2025, https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/tribunes/trois-membres-de-france-terre-dasile-sont-emprisonnes-a-tort-en-tunisie-liberez-les-20250527_RIXNAZBCEBBV3DEDF76QRP6JLM/ (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁵⁶ “Tunisie : libération des détenu-es dans l’affaire « Tunisie, Terre d’asile »,” January 12, 2026, <https://www.fidh.org/fr/regions/maghreb-moyen-orient/tunisie/tunisie-liberation-des-detenu-es-dans-l-affaire-tunisie-terre-d-asile> (accessed May 7, 2026).

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch review of judicial documents in this case. They were charged under articles 39 and 41 of the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents, article 25 of Law No. 68-7 of March 8, 1968 on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia, and other articles of the penal code, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/loi-n-68-7-du-8-mars-1968-relative-a-la-condition-des-etrangers-en-tunisie/#:~:text=9%20%E2%80%93%20Tout%20%C3%A9tranger%20qui%20s%C3%A9journe,Art> (accessed March 20, 2026).

members and employees were prosecuted in connection with a partnership agreement between the municipality of Sousse and the association under which the two worked together to establish an information and guidance office for vulnerable people. The office was located in a municipal building, and its beneficiaries were primarily migrants and refugees.⁵⁸

On January 5, 2026, a Tunis court of first instance convicted Riahi, Ouardani, and the three other detained defendants of “harboring individuals entering Tunisia illegally” and “assisting, directly or indirectly, in the irregular entry or stay” of foreigners in Tunisia and sentenced them to two years in prison with the remainder of their sentences suspended. They were released on the same day after more than 20 months in detention.⁵⁹

The 18 other defendants were acquitted.⁶⁰

Mnemty Association

The authorities have also targeted activists who spoke out against discrimination towards Black people. They used the counterterrorism and money laundering law to arrest and prosecute members of Mnemty (“My Dream” in Tunisian Arabic), a national association established in 2013 to combat racial discrimination, in particular against Black Tunisians.⁶¹

On May 6, 2024, security forces arrested the head of Mnemty, Saadia Mosbah, and its program coordinator, Zied Rouin. They also searched Mosbah’s home and the association’s offices, confiscating devices and documents. Rouin was released after questioning on May 7.⁶²

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch review of judicial documents in this case.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch reviewed a copy of the verdict in this case. “Tunisie : des humanitaires de Terre d’asile condamnés puis libérés après 20 mois de détention,” *TV5Monde*, January 6, 2026, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/tunisie-des-humanitaires-de-terre-dasile-condamnes-puis-liberes-apres-20-mois-de-detention-2804314> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁶⁰ “Tunisie : des responsables de Terre d’asile, jugés pour aide aux migrants, ont été libérés,” *Le Monde*, January 6, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2026/01/06/tunisie-des-responsables-de-terre-d-asile-juges-pour-aide-aux-migrants-ont-ete-liberes_6660704_3212.html (accessed April 23, 2026).

⁶¹ Stephen J. King, “Democracy and Progress towards Racial Equality in Tunisia: Interview with Zied Rouine,” Arab Reform Initiative, March 26, 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/democracy-and-progress-towards-racial-equality-in-tunisia-interview-with-zied-rouine/> (accessed April 6, 2026).

⁶² “Tunisia: Deepening Civil Society Crackdown,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 17, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/17/tunisia-deepening-civil-society-crackdown>.

Mosbah is a prominent Black Tunisian activist and a pioneer in the fight against racism in Tunisia, who contributed to the adoption of a landmark 2018 law for the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.⁶³ Pro-government social media accounts engaged in an aggressive and racist online smear campaign against Mosbah that gained traction days before her arrest.⁶⁴

Mosbah was arrested and held in police custody in connection with an investigation into alleged financial crimes under Tunisia’s 2015 counterterrorism and money laundering law.⁶⁵ A person close to the case told Human Rights Watch that a L’Aouina financial crimes unit questioned Mosbah about Mnemty’s funding and activities. Authorities also summoned other members of the association for interrogation.⁶⁶

On May 16, 2024, a public prosecutor of the Tunis Court of First Instance brought charges against nine people—Mosbah, seven other members of Mnemty, and their landlord—for illicit enrichment, money laundering by an organized group, and failure to maintain adequate accounting records under the counterterrorism and money laundering law, the law on declarations of assets and interests, and on combating illicit enrichment and conflicts of interest and the code of fiscal rights and procedures.⁶⁷ The same day, an investigative judge ordered Mosbah detained without a hearing.⁶⁸

Human Rights Watch reviewed court documents related to the case and found that the authorities relied on a broad interpretation of “illicit enrichment,” defined in the 2018 law on the disclosure of assets and interests, and on combating illicit enrichment and conflicts

⁶³ Omar Fassatoui, “Une loi contre les discriminations raciales en Tunisie : bilan en demi-teinte d’une loi pionnière,” Arab Reform Initiative, February 11, 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/fr/publication/une-loi-contre-les-discriminations-raciales-en-tunisie-bilan-en-demi-teinte-dune-loi-pionniere/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁶⁴ UN Experts communication to the Tunisian government, AL TUN 3/2025, May 28, 2025, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29985> (accessed July 29, 2026).

⁶⁵ “Tunisia: Counterterror Law Endangers Rights,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 31, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/31/tunisia-counterterror-law-endangers-rights>.

⁶⁶ “Tunisia: Deepening Civil Society Crackdown,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 17, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/17/tunisia-deepening-civil-society-crackdown>.

⁶⁷ UN Special Rapporteurs communication to the Tunisian government, May 28, 2025, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29985> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁶⁸ Saadia Mosbah’s lawyers, press conference in Tunisia, April 1, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1257821522635877 (accessed April 23, 2026).

of interest as “any substantial increase in the assets of a person...or a significant increase in their expenditures that is disproportionate to their income and for which they cannot justify the legitimate origin.”⁶⁹

According to her family, Mosbah was first held in Manouba prison near Tunis and then transferred in February 2025 to Belli prison in Jendouba governorate. They said prison authorities denied her access to daily medication for high blood pressure for three weeks after her arrest, and that she was held for several months in an overcrowded cell without enough beds for all the detainees and with unsanitary restrooms.⁷⁰ She also faced racist remarks by inmates and guards and was assaulted at least two times, in one instance by an inmate and another by a prison guard, without the prison administration taking any meaningful action, a relative said. One of the court-appointed financial experts made racist comments against other members of Mnemty during the investigation phase, they said.⁷¹

In addition to the abusive prosecutions, Tunisian authorities took additional measures which harmed the economic security of some of the defendants. They froze the bank accounts of the association as well as Mosbah's personal account, which left her unable to receive her pension.⁷² A judge placed four of the prosecuted Mnemty members under a travel ban, including Mosbah's son Fares, an air traffic controller in Tunis. Due to the ban, he could not access airport runways and his employer, the national airline, transferred him to a different department and then declined to renew his contract in September 2024. He said he considered it to be a retaliatory decision due to his prosecution and that he filed a complaint against the airline in September 2025.⁷³

On July 4, 2025, an investigative judge closed the investigation and dismissed the charges of money laundering against Mosbah but charged her with illicit enrichment and failure to maintain adequate accounting records in connection with the association's management

⁶⁹ “Tunisia: Abusive Prosecutions of Refugee Group,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 24, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/24/tunisia-abusive-prosecutions-of-refugee-group>; Law No. 2018-46 of August 1, 2018, on the Disclosure of Assets and Interests, and on Combating Illicit Enrichment and Conflicts of Interest, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/loi-n-2018-46-du-1er-aout-2018-relative-a-la-declaration-de-patrimoine-et-dinterets-et-a-la-lutte-contre-lenrichissement-illicite-et-les-conflits-dinterets/> (accessed July 29, 2026).

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a relative of Mosbah (name withheld), Tunis, March 13, 2026.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Fares Gueblaoui, Tunisia, March 2026.

and bank transfers she received for work in her personal capacity, two relatives said. The judge dismissed the charges against seven other members of Mnemty and their landlord.⁷⁴

The prosecutor and Mosbah appealed the decision, and in July 2025, the Indictment Chamber overturned the dismissal of charges against Mosbah and the other defendants.⁷⁵ Their trial on charges of “illicit enrichment, money laundering by an organized group exploiting the facilities provided by the associative activities, and failure to hold legal accountability” began on December 22, 2025, before the Tunis Court of First Instance.⁷⁶

On March 19, 2026, the court found the defendants guilty and sentenced six of them to prison terms ranging from one to eight years in prison and heavy fines ranging from approximately 13,000-122,000 Tunisian dinars (\$US4,470-42,000). Mosbah received the harshest sentence of eight years. Five of them were also stripped of their right to vote and to run for office for five years. Three of the defendants were acquitted.⁷⁷

On June 23, the Tunis Appeals Court upheld Mosbah's eight-year sentence, as well as the three-year sentence given to a member living in exile. It handed down suspended sentences of one and two years to four other members, while upholding the acquittal of the remaining three defendants.⁷⁸

Association for the Promotion of the Right to Difference

The authorities opened a financial investigation based on the counterterrorism and money laundering law into the Association for the Promotion of the Right to Difference (ADD), which was founded in 2011 and works to promote minority rights and gender equality.

The Economic and Financial Investigation Brigade of El Gorjani summoned its founder and executive director, Saloua Ghrissa, for questioning on December 9, 2024. Ghrissa, a

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a relative of Mosbah (name withheld), Tunis, March 13, 2026.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Under articles 92 to 97 of the counterterrorism and money laundering law, article 37 of the law on declarations of assets and interests, and on combating illicit enrichment and conflicts of interest and article 97 of the Code of fiscal rights and procedures; Human Rights Watch interview with one of the defendants (name withheld), Tunis, September 2025.

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the lawyers, April 9, 2026.

⁷⁸ “Tunisia: Harsh Sentences for Rights Defenders,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 7, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/07/07/tunisia-harsh-sentences-for-rights-defenders>.

Tunisian-French dual national, was summoned again the next day on December 10 and placed in police custody.⁷⁹ Two days later, an investigative judge of the Bizerte Court issued a detention warrant against her pending an investigation for money laundering and foreign exchange-related offenses, according to one of her lawyers.⁸⁰ Seven other people, including members of the ADD board, were also investigated.⁸¹

According to one of Ghrissa's lawyers, the Tunisian Financial Analysis Commission (CTAF) sent a report to the Tunis General Prosecutor at the end of 2023 alleging suspicious financial transactions involving foreign funds at the organization, prompting the investigation.⁸²

The abusive trial of Ghrissa and six others began on March 5, 2026, on charges of money laundering, violations of foreign-exchange and customs regulations, falsification of computer data, and receiving funds from a state that does not have diplomatic relations with Tunisia, under the counterterrorism and money laundering law, the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Code, Decree law 54 on Cybercrime, and Decree-Law 88 on associations.⁸³ The charges appear to be unfounded and related to the association's foreign funding and financial transactions, including transfers to other associations. The authorities have not provided credible evidence of financial offenses, according to court documents reviewed by Human Rights Watch.⁸⁴

On the second hearing on March 19, Tunisian authorities granted Ghrissa provisional release after 15 months in pretrial detention. The next hearing in their case is scheduled for October, before the Bizerte Court of First Instance.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the lawyers, Tunis, May 2025.

⁸⁰ Under the 2015 Counterterrorism and Money Laundering law, the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Code, Decree Law 54 on Cybercrime, and Decree-Law No. 88 on Associations; Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the lawyers, Tunis, May 2025.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the lawyers, Tunis, May 2025.

⁸² Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the lawyers, Tunis, May 2025.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Indictment Chamber documents reviewed by Human Rights Watch.

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the lawyers, Tunis, August 3, 2026.

Abusive Financial and Criminal Investigations

Tunisian authorities have launched financial and criminal investigations against broad swathes of civil society. Around October 2024, shortly before the presidential election, Tunisia's Tax Evasion Investigation and Prevention Brigade (BILEF)—created in 2017 to combat illicit financial flows—sent notifications of preliminary investigations to at least a dozen associations or NGOs.⁸⁶ These included the regional office of Amnesty International in Tunisia and the national NGO I Watch. Many of these investigations, some of which have been ongoing for nearly two years at time of writing, appear to be unfounded and abusive, intended to intimidate and stifle civil society.

Around the same time, the Directorate General of Associations at the Presidency of the Government sent an unknown number of other associations formal warnings claiming that they had violated the law on associations and giving them one month to comply with the law and respond to the correspondence with required documents. Since then, authorities, including the Complex Financial Crimes' Investigation Unit, have also targeted associations with criminal and financial investigations. In addition, a Tunis court temporarily suspended many associations between July and October 2025.⁸⁷

The widespread use of such summons against a broad swath of civil society critical of the authorities raises serious concerns that the government is weaponizing such processes to target and intimidate civil society organizations.

The investigations, which remain open at time of writing, are burdensome, and pose a threat to the continued operation of these organizations given the broader climate of repression and restrictions on civic space in Tunisia. Investigators have also routinely issued overly burdensome requests for extensive records going back 10 years for many of these organizations and summoning staff, significantly impacting their day-to-day operations even when they are able to remain open.

⁸⁶ "Tunisia: Escalating crackdown on human rights organizations reaches critical levels," Amnesty International news release, November 14, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/11/tunisia-escalating-crackdown-on-human-rights-organizations-reaches-critical-levels/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁸⁷ "Tunisie : suspension de l'OMCT Tunisie, de l'ATFD et du FTDES, trois ONG de droits humains," Fédération Internationale pour les Droits Humains, November 12, 2025, <https://www.fidh.org/fr/themes/defenseurs-des-droits-humains/tunisie-suspension-de-l-omct-tunisie-de-l-atfd-et-du-ftdes-trois-ong> (accessed July 10, 2026).

The following organizations have been the subject of abusive financial investigations based on the counterterrorism and money laundering law, described further below: I Watch, Mourakiboun, Amnesty International, Nawaat Journalists' Association, Legal Agenda, and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights.

Election Monitors: I Watch and Mourakiboun

I Watch and Mourakiboun are two civil society organizations founded after the 2011 revolution. Both are election observation organizations that have monitored all elections in Tunisia since 2011. I Watch also works on issues related to corruption and transparency.⁸⁸

Shortly before the October 2024 presidential election, in which President Saïed ran for a second term, the electoral commission arbitrarily refused to grant both organizations electoral accreditation, raising claims of “suspicious foreign funding” and saying it would refer the case to the courts.⁸⁹ Following the electoral commission’s complaint, a public prosecutor opened an investigation into the two associations and the courts froze their bank accounts shortly after.⁹⁰

The Tax Evasion Investigation Brigade, the Counterterrorism Brigade, and the Complex Financial Crimes Brigade in L'Aouina have each opened investigations into I Watch. These three investigations remain open at time of writing.⁹¹

Teams of investigators requested extensive records of financial, accounting, programmatic, and other documents dating back ten years from both organizations. They questioned several people from I Watch as well as around forty of their partners operating in different regions of the country.⁹²

A Tunis court suspended I Watch for one month in July 2025.⁹³

⁸⁸ I Watch, accessed April 6, 2026, <https://www.iwatch.tn/ar/about>.

⁸⁹ “Tunisia: Authorities Undermine Election Integrity,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 3, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/03/tunisia-authorities-undermine-election-integrity>.

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch Interview with members of the two NGOs, Tunis, December 2024.

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with one of the NGO lawyers (name withheld), Tunisia, February 20, 2026.

⁹² Human Rights Watch interview with a member of I Watch (name withheld), Tunis, September 17, 2025.

⁹³ Ibid.

Amnesty International

Amnesty International's Secretariat opened a North Africa regional office in Tunisia in 2016, following the opening of civic space after the revolution and the country's new legal framework. The organization, which conducts research and advocacy on human rights, has in recent years strongly denounced the regression in human rights, repeated attacks on the independence of the judiciary, and the arbitrary detention of opponents and critics since President Saied's 2021 power grab.⁹⁴

In October 2024, the Tax Evasion Investigation Brigade informed the Tunisian office of Amnesty International's Secretariat that it had opened an investigation into the NGO. The Brigade subsequently summoned the chair of Amnesty International's Tunisia board of directors and two staff members for questioning.⁹⁵ It also requested compliance reports from the prior years, which the organization provided.⁹⁶

In October 2025, the Gorjani Police Financial Crimes Brigade informed Amnesty International that had opened a parallel criminal investigation into the organization.⁹⁷

Nawaat Journalists' Association

The Nawaat Journalists' Association runs the independent media outlet Nawaat, launched by cyber activists in 2004 during President Ben Ali's dictatorship. Available online and as a quarterly print magazine, it is a key part of Tunisia's media landscape.⁹⁸

Starting in April 2025, the El Gorjani Financial Crimes Investigation Unit began investigating Nawaat and summoning its service providers, freelancers, and journalists. Authorities questioned at least thirty people in connection with this investigation.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ "Tunisia," Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁹⁵ "Tunisia: Escalating crackdown on human rights organizations reaches critical levels," Amnesty International news release, November 14, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/11/tunisia-escalating-crackdown-on-human-rights-organizations-reaches-critical-levels/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Nawaat, accessed April 6, 2026, <https://nawaat.org>.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aymen Rezgui, editor-in-chief of Nawaat, Tunis, April 3, 2026.

Aymen Rezgui, the outlet's editor-in-chief, was summoned in June and questioned, including about the financial compensation he receives from Nawaat and his tax deductions.¹⁰⁰

The investigation is ongoing, and Nawaat is also facing other forms of intimidation and harassment, such as online hate campaigns. A court order suspended the Nawaat association for one month on October 31, 2025. The appeal is still pending before the court at time of writing.¹⁰¹

"We have no idea what the future holds. At any moment, our offices could be shut down or the investigation accelerated. We are living on borrowed time," said Rezgui.¹⁰²

Legal Agenda

Legal Agenda is a research and advocacy NGO based in Lebanon, with a Tunisian branch, whose work is often critical of government policies. In August 2025, the Complex Financial Crimes Investigation Brigade of the National Guard in L'Aouina summoned the president of Legal Agenda's Tunisia office. The brigade also questioned the organization's treasurer.¹⁰³

The summons followed a complaint by the Electoral Commission "regarding foreign funding received by Legal Agenda with the aim of influencing the elections," the organization learned during the hearing.¹⁰⁴ Legal Agenda said that it had provided the brigade with all the required administrative and financial documents attesting to its compliance with its obligations and the absence of "exceptional financing linked to the elections."¹⁰⁵

Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights

The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) is an association that focuses on socio-economic issues and the study of social movements, officially created in 2011. Much

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Watch Interview with Aymen Rezgui, Editor in chief of Nawaat, Tunis, April 3, 2026.

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch Interview with Aymen Rezgui, Editor in chief of Nawaat, Tunis, April 3, 2026.

¹⁰³ Legal Agenda Facebook page, January 6, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=858773936788705&set=pcb.858785376787561> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

of its work is also devoted to migration issues, making it a target of various anti-NGO and anti-migrant campaigns on social media, often on pro-government pages and accounts.

In July 2025, FTDES announced it had received a summons from the Tax Evasion Investigation Brigade. The summons was based on a judicial order from the Judicial Police Unit on Economic and Financial Investigations, requested by the Prosecutor's Office at the Tunis Court of First Instance.¹⁰⁶

The investigation focuses on foreign funding and allegations of financial mismanagement and money laundering. FTDES said it responded to the summons by providing the requested administrative and financial documents.¹⁰⁷ Investigators questioned service providers and contractors working with the organization.¹⁰⁸ The investigation was ongoing at time of writing.

¹⁰⁶ Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights Facebook page, July 11, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/ftdes/posts/1044565827846116?ref=embed_post (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights Facebook page, July 11, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/ftdes/posts/1044565827846116?ref=embed_post (accessed March 20, 2026).

Administrative Sanctions

Tunisian authorities have taken a number of administrative steps to obstruct the work of civil society in the country, including mass suspension of associations and other limitations on association and assembly.

The mass suspensions of associations in 2025 and 2026 often lacked legal grounds and were often disproportionate, arbitrarily imposed, or in violation of due process. In most cases documented by Human Rights Watch, associations were not granted a genuine opportunity to contest their suspensions or, prior to that, to effectively address potential breaches. They constitute extreme punitive measures aimed at intimidating and curtailing civil society's work.

The judiciary, which ordered the suspensions at the request of the Government Secretary General, has since 2022 been severely undermined by the executive, which has weaponized it to prosecute and detain dozens of critics and political opponents.¹⁰⁹

Under international law, the principle of proportionality requires that restrictions on freedom of association never be excessive: restrictions can only be imposed if they meet the standard of being “necessary in a democratic society.”¹¹⁰ In applying a limitation, a state is to use no more restrictive means than are required for the achievement of the purpose of the limitation. The dissolution of an association, as the most severe type of restriction on freedom of association, should constitute an ultimate sanction, and may be imposed only when lesser measures of restriction are insufficient.¹¹¹

UN independent experts have found that the suspensions in Tunisia “could constitute disproportionate interference with the rights to freedom of association and expression,” and said that “none of the Government’s measures, takes into account the requirements of

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch, *“All Conspirators”: How Tunisia Uses Arbitrary Detention to Crush Dissent* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/04/16/all-conspirators/how-tunisia-uses-arbitrary-detention-crush-dissent>.

¹¹⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Tunisia on March 18, 1969.

¹¹¹ “Tunisia Suspends Rights Groups That Shaped Its Democracy,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 12, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/05/12/tunisia-suspends-rights-groups-that-shaped-its-democracy>.

legality, necessity, and proportionality applicable to restrictions on the right to freedom of association.”¹¹² Many of the suspensions have also been marred by procedural irregularities, according to two lawyers who assisted several of the organizations.¹¹³

Suspension of Associations

Tunisian authorities have in recent months issued seemingly arbitrary mass suspensions of associations working in the country. In addition to shuttering organizations doing crucial work, many of the suspensions have been marred by irregularities and appear to be disproportionate in nature.¹¹⁴ When suspensions were accompanied by formal notices, these were vague and lacked specificity, which precluded associations from attempting to correct any alleged infringements.¹¹⁵ These recent suspensions appear to be part of the Tunisian authorities’ campaign to dismantle civil society one suspension order at a time, immobilizing organizations that have for decades defended human rights and access to justice.¹¹⁶

Notices suspending certain associations were based on article 3 of Decree-Law 88, which requires associations to respect the principles of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights—a very broad provision subject to abusive interpretation by authorities.¹¹⁷ According to one lawyer, the authorities used overbroad “blanket” warnings that lacked specificity, preventing associations from correcting any potential infringements. Instead, they required associations to provide a long list of administrative and financial documents not required under the law on associations, such as the association’s registers of members or activities.¹¹⁸

Around October 2024, an unknown number of associations received formal warnings from the Directorate General for Associations (DGA) at the Prime Minister’s Office, notifying

¹¹² UN Experts Communication to the Tunisian government, February 4, 2026, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=30724> (accessed April 13, 2026).

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with lawyer Karim Marzouki, Tunisia, February 20, 2026, and with another lawyer (name withheld), Tunis, February 16, 2026.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.; Karim Marzouki, “Suspending Associations in Tunisia: A New Escalation Against Civil Society,” Legal Agenda, December 5, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2k628sef> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹¹⁵ Karim Marzouki, “Suspending Associations in Tunisia: A New Escalation Against Civil Society,” Legal Agenda, December 5, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2k628sef> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹¹⁶ See Bassam Khawaja, “Tunisia Suspends Rights Groups That Shaped Its Democracy,” Human Rights Watch dispatch, May 12, 2026, <http://hrw.org/news/2026/05/12/tunisia-suspends-rights-groups-that-shaped-its-democracy>.

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with an NGO leader (name withheld), Tunis, April 7, 2026.

¹¹⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with lawyer Karim Marzouki, Tunisia, February 20, 2026.

them of alleged violations of Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations and requesting that they provide a series of administrative and financial documents. The list included the association's bylaws, accounting records, register of members, and register of activities, grants, and donations.¹¹⁹

Then, between approximately July and December 2025, many associations received notifications of court decisions suspending their activities for a period of 30 days, following a request filed by the State Litigation Department on behalf of the General Secretariat of the Government.¹²⁰ Following the decision, many associations filed a summary appeal.¹²¹

According to the Tunisian League of Human Rights, these suspensions have affected a large number of associations throughout the country.¹²² However, without official data, it is difficult to determine the exact number of associations affected. Human Rights Watch has identified at least 20 suspended organizations that are active in various sectors, including human rights, governance, media, and agriculture.¹²³

The suspended associations include Aswat Nissa, a feminist group that runs the Najia center, a helpline for women survivors of sexual violence providing legal, social, and psychological counsel, which ceased operations between July and August 2025;¹²⁴ the Tunisian office of the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), whose Sanad program provides direct legal, psychological, social, and medical assistance to victims of torture; and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), which had to close its safe spaces for women survivors of violence.¹²⁵ All three resumed activities after the one month suspension.

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch reviewed formal warnings received by associations.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch interviewed NGO members and lawyers and reviewed statements of suspended associations.

¹²¹ Human Rights Watch interview with a lawyer (name withheld), Tunis, February 16, 2026.

¹²² "Tunisie : plus de 600 associations menacées de suspension," *L'Economiste Maghrébin*, November 11, 2025, <https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2025/11/11/tunisie-plus-de-600-associations-menacees-de-suspension/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹²³ Human Rights Watch interviewed association members and lawyers and reviewed statements of suspended associations.

¹²⁴ Aswat Nissa Facebook page, September 15, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/aswat.nissa/posts/pfbidoJYAjNKjZqJUWN8CSRp1a8CjK5CWcQ7964SEDcsqz9HmybEzZqvmq2uB6ejb2t2Tgl> (accessed April 13, 2026).

¹²⁵ "Tunisie : Suspension de l'OMCT Tunisie, de l'ATFD et du FTDES, trois ONG de droits humains," OMCT, November 6, 2025, <https://www.omct.org/fr/ressources/appels-urgents/tunisie-suspension-de-lomct-tunisie-de-latfd-et-du-ftdes-trois-ong-de-droits-humains> (accessed March 20, 2026).

Associations Targeted by Suspensions

Human Rights		
• Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) • International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) • Mnemty • World Organization Against Torture (Organisation mondiale contre la torture, OMCT) • Tunisian Forum on Economic and Social Rights • Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH)		
Women's Rights	Children's Rights	Media
• Aswat Nissa • Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates, ATFD)	• Association innocence	• Al Khatt / Inkyfada • Nawaat Journalists' Association
Anti-corruption	Sustainable Development	Health
• I Watch	• Nakhla • Tunisian Wildlife Association (Association tunisienne de la vie sauvage, ATVS)	• Tunisian Organization of Young Doctors (OTJM)

Procedural Irregularities

Many of these suspensions have been marred by procedural irregularities.¹²⁶ Article 45 of Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations states that only judges have the authority to order the suspension of activities or dissolution of an association. This involves a three-stage process, under which the association first receives a formal warning to remedy the alleged violation within 30 days. This may be followed, if necessary, by a 30-day suspension of

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with lawyer Karim Marzouki, Tunisia, February 20, 2026, and with another lawyer (name withheld), Tunis, February 16, 2026.

activity through a government application to the Court of First Instance in Tunis. After that period, if the association has failed to correct alleged infractions, the court may order its dissolution.¹²⁷

However, three suspended organizations said they never received the required initial formal warning and therefore were unable to respond and address any alleged infraction. The Tunisian office of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) told Human Rights Watch that it had been directly notified of the suspension of activities in October 2025, without having received any prior formal warning.¹²⁸ The media outlet Nawaat, which is registered as an association, said it was not officially notified with a formal warning but learned of its suspension during questioning of its legal representative as part of an ongoing judicial investigation.¹²⁹

The formal notices sent to associations in 2024 did not specify the alleged violations, according to lawyers.¹³⁰ They only indicated the articles of law allegedly violated without providing further details. They required the associations to provide a long list of documents relating to their operations, activities, and funding. Article 45 of the decree-law requires that “the offense committed” must be established by the secretary general of the government.¹³¹

Three associations told Human Rights Watch that they received and responded to the formal warning by providing all the required documents and supporting evidence, yet were suspended despite not receiving a reply to their correspondence, any additional requests for documents or clarification, or notice of what they had failed to correct.¹³²

Government warnings sent to associations referred mainly to articles 39-44 of Decree-Law 88 regarding the maintenance of accounting records in accordance with Law No. 96-112 of December 30, 1996, which includes an obligation to maintain a register of members,

¹²⁷ Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of September 24, 2011, relating to associations, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-loi-n-2011-88-du-24-septembre-2011-relatif-aux-associations/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a representative of ICJ Tunisia (name withheld), Tunisia, February 5, 2026.

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aymen Rezgui, editor-in-chief of Nawaat, Tunis, April 3, 2026.

¹³⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with lawyer Karim Marzouki, Tunisia, February 20, 2026, and with another lawyer (name withheld), Tunis, February 16, 2026.

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with lawyer Karim Marzouki, Tunisia, February 20, 2026.

¹³² Human Rights Watch interview with association representatives, February 2026-April 2026.

activities, and grants; to publish and declare foreign funding; and to appoint an auditor and publish financial statements.¹³³ In two instances documented by Human Rights Watch, authorities alleged that associations violated article 44 of Decree-Law 88 concerning public funding disclosures even where they did not receive public funds, according to lawyers.¹³⁴

Risk of Dissolution

Under Tunisian law, an association may appeal a suspension decision and request its revocation through summary proceedings. The administration may initiate legal proceedings to dissolve the association once all appeal avenues concerning the suspension have been exhausted.¹³⁵

A group of lawyers who assisted 18 associations in filing appeals to overturn the suspensions said all had their appeals rejected at this stage.¹³⁶

As a result, the suspended associations now risk dissolution.¹³⁷

At least two associations, Al Khatt and Mnemty, are facing dissolution proceedings before the Tunis Court of First Instance as of August 2026.

Al Khatt is a national association operating since 2013 as a think tank and a forum for reflection on the future of journalism.¹³⁸ It publishes *Inkyfada*, an independent investigative media outlet founded in 2014 to serve as a “counterweight to power.”¹³⁹ Al Khatt received a 30-day suspension order in October 2025, on the grounds of the non-declaration of a foreign wire transfer, which Al Khatt said it had declared within the prescribed timeframe.¹⁴⁰ The association filed summary (interim relief) proceedings

¹³³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with lawyer Karim Marzouki, Tunisia, February 20, 2026, and with another lawyer (name withheld), Tunis, February 16, 2026.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with a lawyer (name withheld), Tunis, February 16, 2026.

¹³⁷ “تعليق نشاط الجمعيات في تونس: تصعيد جديد ضد العمل المدني,” Legal Agenda, December 5, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2k628sef> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹³⁸ Al Khatt, accessed July 31, 2026, https://alkhatt.org/fr/about-fr_fr/.

¹³⁹ Inkyfada, accessed July 31, 2026, <https://inkyfada.com/fr/apropos/>.

¹⁴⁰ “Al Khatt convoquée en dissolution le 11 mai,” Al Khatt’s Facebook page, April 21, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Xz8STLDY7/> (accessed July 31, 2026).

against the suspension order, but the court declined to rule on the grounds that the suspension had already been carried out by the time the case was heard, rendering the request moot. The court never examined the merits of the suspension itself.¹⁴¹ In April 2026, Al Khatt announced that the authorities had moved to request its dissolution.¹⁴²

Mnemty similarly lost its appeal against a 30-day suspension.¹⁴³ The government's dissolution case against it opened alongside Al Khatt's on May 11, 2026,¹⁴⁴ and has since been postponed multiple times as of August 2026.¹⁴⁵

Banking and other Restrictions

Banking Restrictions

Amid this climate of restrictions on civic space, national associations and international organizations based in Tunisia have also faced arbitrary banking restrictions. While Human Rights Watch does not have evidence of direct government responsibility for the restrictions, organizations experience them as part of the widespread crackdown on their ability to operate in Tunisia. According to lawyers and NGOs, these actions by private banks stem from a climate of fear and heightened suspicion toward civil society organizations, following growing rhetoric of distrust and hostility toward associations from the highest level of the state, including President Saïed. In most cases, these measures have not been accompanied by clear or written justifications.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ "International legal and human rights organizations condemn the Tunisian Authorities' escalating attacks on the legal profession, the independence of the judiciary and civil society," International Commission of Jurists joint statement, June 9, 2026, <https://www.icj.org/international-legal-and-human-rights-organizations-condemn-the-tunisian-authorities-escalating-attacks-on-the-legal-profession-the-independence-of-the-judiciary-and-civil-society/> (accessed July 31, 2026).

¹⁴⁴ "Tunisia: Dozens of NGOs at risk of dissolution as crackdown on civil society intensifies," Amnesty International news release, May 11, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/05/tunisia-dozens-of-ngos-at-risk-of-dissolution-as-crackdown-on-civil-society-intensifies/> (accessed July 31, 2026); "Tunisia: Quash unjust convictions of anti-racism activists Saadia Mosbah and Mnemty staff," Amnesty International news release, June 17, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/06/tunisia-quash-unjust-convictions-of-anti-racism-activists-saadia-mosbah-and-mnemty-staff/> (accessed July 31, 2026).

¹⁴⁵ "Dissolution de l'association 'Mnemty'... Verdict, le 24 août," Mosaïque FM, July 29, 2026, <https://www.mosaicquefm.net/fr/national-tunisie/1525591/dissolution-de-l-association-mnemty-verdict-le-24-aout> (accessed July 31, 2026).

¹⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with lawyers and NGO members, Tunisia, October 2024-April 2026.

The banking restrictions have significant implications for organization's ability to operate in Tunisia. They have lost access to a hard currency or convertible dinar accounts, had foreign funds blocked for weeks at a time or returned to sender, and had bank accounts closed. These restrictions have disrupted the organizations' operations and activities.¹⁴⁷

On March 11, 2024, the Central Bank of Tunisia published a circular regarding money transfers to associations from abroad, stating that "all authorized [banking] intermediaries are required to report to the Central Bank all financial transfers from abroad to associations or non-profit organizations on a monthly basis."¹⁴⁸ Prior to this circular, private banks were only required to report suspicious funds to the Central Bank.¹⁴⁹

Courts have also frozen associations' accounts in connection with investigations or legal proceedings, including I Watch, Mnemty, and the Tunisian Council for Refugees.¹⁵⁰ The freeze of I Watch's bank account brought its activities to a halt, with significant impact on its employees' livelihoods, as well as on payments to service providers and expenses, creating debt for the association, according to one of its lawyers.¹⁵¹

Other Restrictions on Civil Society Work

Tunisian authorities have taken additional steps to restrict civil society organizations' ability to carry out their work, including arbitrarily denying accreditation, introducing more stringent regulations, and restricting public events.

Before the October 2024 presidential election, the electoral commission, which Saïed restructured in 2022 to place under his control, arbitrarily denied accreditation to at least two leading election observation groups, I Watch and Mourakiboun, depriving them of access to polling stations to observe the vote.¹⁵² In September, the commission said in a

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with impacted organizations, Tunisia, October 2024-December 2025.

¹⁴⁸ "BCT : de nouvelles règles pour les transferts financiers des associations," *Managers*, March 13, 2024, <https://managers.tn/2024/03/13/bct-nouvelles-regles-pour-les-transferts-financiers-des-associations/> (accessed March 20, 2026); "Circulaire aux intermédiaires agréés N°2024-07," Banque Centrale de Tunisie, March 11, 2024, <https://www.cbf.org.tn/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/07-Circulaire-aux-intermediaires-agrees-n%C2%B02024-07-du-11-Mars-2024.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2026).

¹⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with an NGO leader (name withheld), Tunis, April 7, 2026.

¹⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interviews with lawyers and association members, Tunisia, October 2024-April 2026.

¹⁵¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with one of the group's lawyers, Tunisia, February 20, 2026.

¹⁵² "Tunisia: Authorities Undermine Election Integrity," Human Rights Watch news release, October 3, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/03/tunisia-authorities-undermine-election-integrity>.

statement that the denial was due to “suspicious foreign funding...from countries with which Tunisia does not have diplomatic relations” and that it had referred the cases to the authorities for investigation.¹⁵³ Mourakiboun and I Watch were founded after the 2011 uprisings and have observed elections ever since. Both were under investigation at time of writing.

The Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH), the only local association authorized to conduct prison visits in Tunisia, has faced access restrictions since at least November 2025. In December 2025, the group said that several of its delegations were prevented from visiting prisons, particularly in Gafsa, Mahdia, Belli, Nadhour, and Borj Erroumi.¹⁵⁴

Later, on January 22, 2026, the League announced that the Justice Ministry had introduced a requirement of prior authorization for prison visits, even though, according to the League, its 2015 memorandum of understanding with the ministry only required prior notification. The organization said the measure “undermines its monitoring and oversight role and constitutes an obstacle to people’s right to be informed about the situation in prisons and respect for human rights.”¹⁵⁵

During the same period, defense lawyers in Tunisia denounced restrictions on access to their clients in prison, particularly for individuals who had been convicted on appeal in politically motivated cases and who had appealed to the Court of Cassation.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ “ISIE: I Watch et Mourakiboun font l’objet d’enquêtes pour financements étrangers suspects,” *Réalités*, September 7, 2024, <https://realites.com.tn/fr/isie-i-watch-et-mourakiboun-font-lobjet-denquetes-pour-financements-etranagers-suspects/#:~:text=Najla%20Abrougui%2C%20membre%20de%20l'Instance%20Sup%C3%Agrieure%20Ind%C3%A9pendante,de%20notifications%20de%20la%20part%20d'autorit%C3%A9s%20officielles> (accessed April 6, 2026).

¹⁵⁴ “La LTDH empêchée d’effectuer une visite à la prison civile de Gafsa,” *Business News*, December 5, 2025, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2025/12/05/la-ltdh-empechee-deffectuer-une-visite-en-prison/1377029/> (accessed April 6, 2026).

¹⁵⁵ “La LTDH refuse l’autorisation préalable pour visiter les prisons,” *African Manager*, January 23, 2026, <https://africanmanager.com/la-ltdh-refuse-la-decision-du-ministere-de-la-justice-dimposer-une-autorisation-prealable-pour-visiter-les-prisons/> (accessed March 20, 2026); Myriam Ben Zineb, “La LTDH dénonce une nouvelle interdiction d’accès aux prisons et annonce une conférence de presse,” *Business News*, January 22, 2026, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2026/01/22/la-ltdh-denonce-une-nouvelle-interdiction-daccès-aux-prisons-et-annonce-une-conference-de-presse/1384526/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁵⁶ “Dalila Ben Mbarek dénonce l’entrave systématique au droit des avocats de visiter leurs détenus,” *Business News*, January 19, 2026, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2026/01/19/dalila-ben-mbarek-denonce-lentrave-systematique-au-droit-des-avocats-de-visiter-leurs-detenus/1383719/> (accessed April 6, 2026).

On April 10 and May 9, 2025, security forces banned two events at the Rio Theater in Tunis without legal grounds. The first event was a “mock trial” held in support of people arbitrarily detained for their peaceful opinions and political activities as part of the notorious and abusive “Conspiracy Case.”¹⁵⁷ The second was a rally planned on May 11 in support of imprisoned journalist Mourad Zeghidi who had been arrested a year earlier.¹⁵⁸ In both instances, security forces told the Rio—a private cultural venue—that authorization from the authorities was required to hold such an event, even though this requirement has no basis in law.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Sofiene Ghoubantini, “La police interdit la simulation de procès équitable prévue à la salle Le Rio,” *Business News*, April 10, 2025, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2025/04/10/la-police-interdit-la-simulation-de-proces-equitable-prevue-a-la-salle-le-rio/1358734/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁵⁸ Hassen Khemakhem, “Les autorités empêchent l’événement marquant les 365 jours de détention de Mourad Zeghidi,” *Business News*, May 9, 2025, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2025/05/09/les-autorites-empechent-levenement-marquant-les-365-jours-de-detention-de-mourad-zeghidi/1361154/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁵⁹ Sofiene Ghoubantini, “La police interdit la simulation de procès équitable prévue à la salle Le Rio,” *Business News*, April 10, 2025, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2025/04/10/la-police-interdit-la-simulation-de-proces-equitable-prevue-a-la-salle-le-rio/1358734/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

Attempts to Restrict the Association Law

Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations, adopted in September 2011, replaced previous repressive legislation that had criminalized participation in officially unrecognized associations.¹⁶⁰ Its adoption was an important step toward bringing Tunisian national law in line with Tunisia's obligation under international human rights law to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to freedom of association. The law enabled the creation of many associations and has fostered the emergence of a dynamic civil society active in many areas. Crucially, it enabled associations to automatically gain legal status via simple notification to the competent authorities and to receive foreign funding without government authorization.¹⁶¹

At different times, including during the democratic transition period following the 2011 uprising, the government attempted to amend or replace the law on associations, but failed partly due to opposition from civil society actors.¹⁶² Since Saïed's 2021 power grab, authorities have at least twice launched initiatives to replace Decree-Law 2011-88 with a more restrictive framework.

A government draft law leaked in early 2022, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, would grant government authorities excessively broad powers and discretion to interfere in the creation, operation, activities, and funding of civil society organizations, as well as their ability to speak publicly about their work and to express their views.¹⁶³

This bill would restore a Ben Ali era requirement for government authorization before an organization can legally operate. It states that associations must not “threaten the unity of the state or its republican and democratic system” and that their published material must

¹⁶⁰ “Tunisia: Suspension of Associations Arbitrary,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 13, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/13/tunisia-suspension-associations-arbitrary>.

¹⁶¹ Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of September 24, 2011, relating to associations, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-loi-n-2011-88-du-24-septembre-2011-relatif-aux-associations/> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁶² “L'érosion de la liberté d'association en Tunisie,” *Al Bawsala*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.albawsala.com/fr/publications/communiqués/20181479> (accessed April 4, 2026).

¹⁶³ “Tunisia: Looming Curbs on Civil Society Must Be Stopped,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 11, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/11/tunisia-looming-curbs-civil-society-must-be-stopped>.

align with “integrity,” “professionalism,” and “legal and scientific regulations,” broad wording that could enable abusive enforcement by the authorities.¹⁶⁴

The bill would introduce a new requirement that all foreign financing be approved by the Tunisian Financial Analysis Commission of the Central Bank responsible for combating money laundering and terrorist financing. A 2018 survey of 100 civil society organizations in Tunisia found that nearly two-fifths relied either partly or mainly on funding from abroad.¹⁶⁵ However, the current law already provides safeguards and procedures to ensure transparency and compliance. Under Decree-Law 88-2011, civil society organizations must publish details of all foreign funding within one month.

While combatting money laundering and terrorism are legitimate objectives, they should not be used as pretexts to control or prohibit foreign funding for civil society organizations by requiring prior approval. The bill would empower authorities within the Prime Minister’s Office to summarily dissolve civil society organizations that remained inactive beyond a certain length of time. It could also permit the authorities to dissolve such groups at will and outside of judicial procedures. Under current legislation, civil society groups may only be dissolved by their own members or by the courts in response to a government petition.¹⁶⁶

In October 2023, 10 parliamentarians submitted another bill on associations to parliament. If enacted, the bill would grant the government pervasive control and oversight over the establishment, activities, operations, and funding of independent groups.¹⁶⁷

While the text claimed to maintain a notification system for establishing new associations, the 2023 bill would create significant barriers to registration. It would introduce a thinly disguised registration system, granting a department under the Prime Minister’s Office the authority to deny a group the right to operate within a month after it registers. It would also

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “The State of Civic Freedoms in the Middle East and North Africa,” June 2018, <https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/The-State-of-Civic-Freedoms-in-MENA-FINAL.pdf> (accessed July 10, 2026).

¹⁶⁶ “Tunisia: Looming Curbs on Civil Society Must Be Stopped,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 11, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/11/tunisia-looming-curbs-civil-society-must-be-stopped>.

¹⁶⁷ “Tunisia: Reject Bill Dismantling Civil Society,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 7, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/07/tunisia-reject-bill-dismantling-civil-society>.

allow the government to petition the judiciary at any time requesting the cancellation of an association's registration, without being required to provide a reason.¹⁶⁸

In addition, the 2023 bill would not permit new organizations to operate until a government-headed “administration of associations” published a notice in the Official Gazette, empowering it to effectively deny a group's registration. It would require international organizations to obtain prior authorization from the Foreign Affairs Ministry to register. The draft bill empowers the ministry to issue temporary authorizations and to revoke and suspend them at its own discretion, without setting conditions or deadlines for any such process. As a result, international organizations could be arbitrarily denied registration for any reason without due process.

The bill would also open the door for authorities to interpret its many vague provisions to ban or dissolve associations. The draft text provides that the Prime Minister's Office may “automatically” dissolve any organization “suspected of terrorism” or with a “terrorist background,” without judicial review.

The 2023 bill provides for a number of additional arbitrary restrictions on associations in Tunisia. The text prohibits the creation of associations based on religious or ethnic grounds. National associations would have to obtain prior approval from the Prime Minister's Office before receiving foreign funding or risk immediate suspension or dissolution. The bill also specifies that work within a group must be “voluntary,” which could be interpreted as a ban on paid labor at non-profit groups.¹⁶⁹

On March 30, 2026, the parliamentarians submitted an amended version of the text to parliament.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ “Tunisia: Reject Bill Dismantling Civil Society,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 7, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/07/tunisia-reject-bill-dismantling-civil-society>.

¹⁷⁰ “Financement étranger et associations : la Tunisie vers un durcissement des règles... ce qui va changer (Vidéo),” *Tunisie numérique*, March 31, 2026, https://www.tunisienumerique.com/financement-etranger-et-associations-la-tunisie-vers-un-durcissement-des-regles-ce-qui-va-changer-video/#google_vignette (accessed April 13, 2026).

United Nations experts have urged the Tunisian authorities to “take the necessary steps to ensure that any legal reform complies with international standards” and “to consider Decree-Law 2011-88 as the minimum standard for regulating freedom of association.”¹⁷¹ They have also emphasized the need to establish “an ongoing and representative dialogue” with civil society and relevant stakeholders.¹⁷²

In 2025, the Tunisian authorities have again expressed their willingness to replace or amend Decree-Law 2011-88. According to diplomatic sources, a new bill on associations is currently being drafted.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ UN Experts Communication to the Tunisian government, OL TUN 1/2024, January 29, 2024, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=28728> (accessed April 5, 2026).

¹⁷² UN Experts Communication to the Tunisian government, OL TUN 4/2022, April 19, 2022, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27199> (accessed July 29, 2026).

¹⁷³ Information shared by Tunisian authorities with diplomatic missions.

Legal Obligations

Tunisia is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which guarantee the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression, to not be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention, and to a fair trial.

Tunisia is obliged to respect, protect, promote, and fulfill the right to freedom of association, guaranteed by article 22 of the ICCPR and article 10 of the African Charter. Restrictions on the exercise of this right may be permissible only when they are prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society; that is, using the least restrictive means possible and reflecting basic values of pluralism and tolerance.¹⁷⁴

“Necessary” restrictions must also be proportionate; that is, carefully balanced against the specific reason for imposing them in the first place. In addition, they may not be discriminatory, including on the grounds of national origin or political opinion or belief.¹⁷⁵

The ICCPR guarantees everyone “the right to liberty and security of person” and holds that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention” or “deprived of [their] liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.”¹⁷⁶ It further mandates that everyone be informed at the time of their arrest of the reasons for the arrest and the criminal charges, if any, against them. They must be brought “promptly” before a judge or other authorized judicial officer and have the right to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court.¹⁷⁷ In addition, victims of unlawful arrest or detention have “an enforceable right to compensation.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (hereafter “ICCPR”), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Tunisia on March 18, 1969, art. 22.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.; African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (hereafter “African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights”), adopted June 27, 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), entered into force October 21, 1986.

¹⁷⁶ ICCPR, arts. 9(1), 1(1).

¹⁷⁷ ICCPR, art. 9(3).

¹⁷⁸ ICCPR, art. 9(5).

Under international law, a suspect should be held in pretrial detention only in exceptional circumstances when the court or judicial power determines that there are legitimate reasons for holding them that are compelling, individualized, and subject to periodic review and appeal.¹⁷⁹ Pretrial detention is only to be imposed as “an exception” under article 84 of Tunisia’s Criminal Procedure Code.¹⁸⁰

Under international standards, states have an obligation to ensure that detention centers meet basic standards of hygiene, sanitation, ventilation, nutrition, and access to adequate health care. Detention conditions that fail to meet the minimum standards, causing physical and psychological suffering, may amount to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under international law.¹⁸¹

The African Charter also protects the right to seek and obtain asylum from persecution,¹⁸² and Tunisia’s 2022 Constitution guarantees the right to political asylum.¹⁸³ Tunisia is party to both the 1951 UN and 1969 Organization of African Unity refugee conventions, which protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.¹⁸⁴ These protections include a prohibition on penalizing asylum seekers for irregular entry or stay in a country if they promptly present themselves to that country’s authorities; an absolute prohibition on refoulement (the return of a refugee to their country of origin if they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on protected grounds covered in the conventions); and a prohibition on expulsion of refugees, other than “on grounds of national security or public order.”¹⁸⁵ The African Charter also prohibits mass expulsions of non-nationals “aimed at national, racial, ethnic, or religious groups.”¹⁸⁶ The ICCPR and the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Tunisia has ratified, further expand the principle of nonrefoulement by prohibiting states from

¹⁷⁹ ICCPR.

¹⁸⁰ Tunisia’s Code of Criminal Procedure, <https://www.droit-afrique.com/upload/doc/tunisie/Tunisie-Code-2010-procedure-penale.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2025).

¹⁸¹ United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), adopted December 17, 2015, G.A. Res. 70/175.

¹⁸² African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, art. 12(3).

¹⁸³ The Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia of July 25, 2022, art 32, <https://tinyurl.com/y4py9dwm> (accessed March 20, 2026).

¹⁸⁴ Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter “Refugee Convention”), 189 U.N.T.S. 150, entered into force April 22, 1954, ratified by Tunisia on October 24, 1957; Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (African Refugee Convention), 1001 UNTS 45, entered into force June 20, 1974, ratified by Tunisia on December 18, 1989.

¹⁸⁵ Refugee Convention, arts. 1, 31-33; African Refugee Convention, arts. 1-2.

¹⁸⁶ African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, art. 12(5).

expelling or returning people to countries where they face risks of torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.¹⁸⁷

Under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Tunisia is obliged to “condemn racial discrimination” and undertake all appropriate means aimed at “eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ ICCPR, art. 7; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment (hereafter Convention against Torture), adopted December 10, 1984, G.A. res. 39/46, annex, 39 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 51) at 197, U.N. Doc. A/39/51 (1984), entered into force June 26, 1987, ratified by Tunisia in 1988, art. 3; Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 20: Article 7 (Prohibition of Torture or Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment), March 10, 1992, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fbo.html> (accessed June 9, 2026), para. 9 (“States parties must not expose individuals to the danger of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment upon return to another country by way of their extradition, expulsion or refoulement.”). The Human Rights Committee provides authoritative interpretations of the ICCPR.

¹⁸⁸ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted December 21, 1965, G.A. Res. 2106 (XX), annex, 20 UN GAOR Supp. (No. 14) at 47, UN Doc A/6014 (1966), 660 U.N.T.S. 195, entered into force January 4, 1969, ratified by Tunisia on January 13, 1967.

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by a researcher in the Middle East and North Africa division. Bassam Khawaja, deputy Middle East and North Africa director, edited this report. Senior legal advisor, Clive Baldwin, conducted legal review. Lama Fakhri, Global Program Director, conducted program review.

Lauren Seibert, senior researcher in the Refugee and Migrant Rights Division, Lucy McKernan, UN Human Rights Council director, Nicola Paccamiccio, UN Geneva advocacy coordinator, and Matt McConnell, researcher in the Economic Justice and Rights Division, provided specialist reviews.

A research assistant in the Middle East and North Africa division fact checked this report.

We would like to express our gratitude to all those who spoke with us during the research for this report, including those who have been unjustly prosecuted, the families of detainees or former detainees, their lawyers, and members of civil society who continue to work and mobilize to protect what remains of civic space and the rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly, despite the serious risks, threats, and intimidation they face.

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Annex I: Human Rights Watch Letter to the Tunisian General Directorate of Associations

July 21, 2026

Prime Minister Sarra Zaafrani Zenzri
Presidency of the Government
General Directorate of Associations
Tunis, Tunisia

RE: Questions from Human Rights Watch on Civic Space in Tunisia

Dear Mr. Mastrouri,

Please accept my regards on behalf of Human Rights Watch,
an independent international organization that monitors and reports on
violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in more
than 100 countries around the world.

We write with respect to a report we are preparing on the situation of civil
society organizations and their members in Tunisia. In our research, we
documented apparent arbitrary suspensions of associations by the
judiciary. These suspensions were requested by the Secretary General of
the Government, following a procedure initiated by the General Directorate
of Associations under your predecessor.

As part of this work, we are seeking information related to the procedures
of suspension and dissolution of associations, as well as developments
regarding the association law.

We write to you, to respectfully request related information. Any written
response to our questions received by August 6, 2026 will be reflected in

our upcoming report. Please note that we may publish your response, in whole or in part, at our discretion.

You can reach us at [REDACTED] for further information or clarification, or to respond directly to our questions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your kind cooperation.

Respectfully,

Bassam Khawaja



Deputy Director
Middle East and North Africa Division
Human Rights Watch

ANNEX: Questions to the Presidency of the Government

General Directorate of Associations

Suspensions of Associations

Human Rights Watch research found that between July 2025 and May 2026, several associations registered in Tunisia were suspended by judicial decision at the request of the Government's General Secretary. These have reportedly included Aswat Nissa, I Watch, the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the Nawaat Journalists' Association, El Khatt and others. Many of the suspensions appear to have been marred by irregularities and disproportionate in nature, according to our documentation.

1. How many associations were suspended by the authorities in 2025 and 2026?
2. On what grounds does the Government's General Secretary file a suspension request?
3. What steps are authorities taking and what safeguards are in place to ensure that suspensions are not used arbitrarily or abusively against civil society in Tunisia?

According to Human Rights Watch research, some of the associations suspended never received the warning from the General Directorate of Associations, received a warning that did not specify the infringement committed, or answered a request to produce compliance documents or remedy any infringements but were still suspended.

1. According to lawyers who represented the targeted associations, the warning received did not specify clearly "the infringement committed" as required by law, and only referred to articles of the Decree-Law 88, including general provisions such as its article 3, without further details.
 - a. With regard to the aforementioned associations, on what grounds did the authorities send the initial warnings?
 - b. Are the suspensions without proper notice of the infringement committed legal under Tunisian law?
2. What procedure is in place to allow the associations to remedy any potential infringements before a suspension request?
3. Some associations that responded to the government's requests following the formal warnings and provided requested documents said that they received no response and were subsequently suspended. Why did the authorities not follow up with these associations if their response was deemed insufficient before requesting their suspension?

Dissolution of Associations

According to Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations, a request to dissolve an association is a measure of last resort that should only be initiated if the association has not ceased the infringement despite having been served with a warning, the suspension of its activities and the exhaustion of all legal remedies against the suspension decision.

1. Once an association has been suspended, what steps are available to it to avoid subsequent dissolution?
2. Recently, the authorities requested the dissolution of associations that had previously been suspended, including El Khatt and Mnemty. On what grounds did the authorities request the dissolution of these associations?

Association Law

The Tunisian government has previously announced an intention to replace the current Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations.

1. To the best of your knowledge, does the government still plan to replace or amend the Decree-Law 88 on associations?
2. If so, which steps has the government taken in this regard?

Civil society groups, including Human Rights Watch, reviewed a government draft law on associations leaked in early 2022 and found that it would grant government authorities excessively broad powers and discretion.

1. Is this bill still under consideration?
2. If the authorities still intend to replace the current law on associations, what measures or steps does the government plan to ensure that any change in the law is subject to broad consultation with civil society and will guarantee the right to freedom of association?
 - a. Is there any draft under consideration?

A draft bill on associations was introduced by members of parliament in October 2023. Human Rights Watch reviewed the draft and found that it introduces arbitrary restrictions

on associations and gives pervasive control to the authorities to interfere with the creation and functioning of associations.

1. Does the government intend to support this bill?
2. What measures or steps does the government plan to ensure that any change in the law guarantees the right to freedom of association?

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Annex II: Human Rights Watch Letter to the Tunisian Parliament

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July 21, 2026

Mr. Brahim Bouderbela

Speaker of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People
Tunis, Tunisia

RE: Questions from Human Rights Watch on Civic Space in Tunisia

Dear Mr. Speaker,

Please accept my regards on behalf of Human Rights Watch,
an independent international organization that monitors and reports on
violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in more
than 100 countries around the world.

We write with respect to a report we are preparing on the situation of civil
society organizations and their members in Tunisia. As part of this work,
we are researching the current developments related to the Law on
Associations, the Law on Passports and Travel Documents, and Law on the
Status of Foreigners in Tunisia.

We write to you, to respectfully request related information. Any written
response to our questions received by August 6, 2026 will be reflected in
our upcoming report. Please note that we may publish your response, in
whole or in part, at our discretion.

You can reach us at [REDACTED] for further information or clarification,
or to respond directly to our questions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your kind cooperation.

Respectfully,



Bassam Khawaja

Deputy Director

Middle East and North Africa Division

Human Rights Watch

ANNEX: Questions to the Speaker of Assembly of the Representatives of the People

Law on Associations

The Tunisian government has announced since 2022 an intention to replace the current Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations. A draft bill on associations was introduced by members of parliament in October 2023. Human Rights Watch reviewed the draft law and found that it would introduce arbitrary restrictions on associations and give pervasive control to the authorities to interfere with the creation and functioning of associations. An amended draft bill was reintroduced on March 30, 2026.

1. What is the current status of the bill on associations introduced by members of parliament in October 2023 and re-introduced in March 2026?
2. Is the Assembly currently considering any other bill intended to replace or amend Decree-Law 88 on associations?
3. Has the Assembly received any government draft law on associations, and if so, at what stage is it in the legislative process?
4. Has any parliamentary committee been tasked with examining a proposed reform of the law on associations?
5. What mechanisms does the Assembly have in place to ensure civil society is heard before legislation affecting freedom of association is passed?
6. What measures or steps does the Assembly plan to take to ensure that any change in the law guarantees the right to freedom of association?

Law on Passports and Travel Documents and Law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination found in its 2025 review of Tunisia that the arbitrary interpretation of overly broad provisions of the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents and the 1968 Law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia restrict the rights to freedom of expression and association and arbitrarily silence human rights defenders and civil society groups, and it recommended that Tunisia review its legislative framework, in particular these two laws, to ensure open space for civil society organizations. Human Rights Watch has found that the judiciary has also used vague provisions from these laws to criminalize aid to refugees and migrants in Tunisia.

1. Is amendment of the 1975 and 1968 laws part of the Assembly's current legislative agenda?

2. Has any bill seeking to repeal these provisions or to amend them to align with international standards been introduced, whether by the government or by members of parliament?

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Annex III: Human Rights Watch Letter to the Tunisian Ministry of Justice

HUMAN
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July 21, 2026

Minister Leila Jaffel

Ministry of Justice

Tunis, Tunisia

[REDACTED]

RE: Questions from Human Rights Watch on Civic Space in Tunisia

Dear Minister Jaffel,

Please accept my regards on behalf of Human Rights Watch,
an independent international organization that monitors and reports on
violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in more
than 100 countries around the world.

We write with respect to a report we are preparing on the situation of civil
society organizations and their members in Tunisia. Our research has
documented escalating repression of local and international civil society
organizations and their members, targeting them with arbitrary arrests and
detention, financial and criminal investigations, apparent arbitrary
suspensions, and moves to tighten the legislative framework governing
associations and restrict the right to freedom of association.

We write to you, to respectfully request related information. Any written
response to our questions received by August 6, 2026 will be reflected in

our upcoming report. Please note that we may publish your response, in whole or in part, at our discretion.

You can reach us at [REDACTED] for further information or clarification, or to respond directly to our questions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your kind cooperation.

Respectfully,

Bassam Khawaja



Deputy Director
Middle East and North Africa Division
Human Rights Watch

ANNEX: Questions to the Tunisian Ministry of Justice

Arbitrary Detention

Human Rights Watch research found that the authorities have used existing legislation criminalizing assistance to foreigners with irregular immigration status to prosecute and detain members and staff of legally registered associations in Tunisia.

1. What steps is the Ministry of Justice taking to ensure that broad laws such as the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents and the 1968 Law on the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia are not being arbitrarily used to prosecute people for their legitimate work, in particular asylum-related or humanitarian aid to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, including those without regular status in Tunisia?
 - a. Has the ministry taken any action in response to abusive or arbitrary prosecutions of civil society since 2021? If so, please provide details of such actions and their results.
2. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination found in its 2025 review of Tunisia that the arbitrary interpretation of overly broad provisions of these two laws restrict the rights to freedom of expression and association and arbitrarily silence human rights defenders and civil society groups. It recommended that Tunisia reviews its legislative framework, in particular these two laws, to ensure open space for civil society organizations. Are the authorities planning to amend or replace the legislative framework to align with international standards, avoid arbitrary interpretation and the criminalization of aid?
 - a. If so, please provide details.

Human Rights Watch research documented the cases of NGO workers who have been prosecuted, including at least eight arrested between May and December 2024, in connection with their organization's work providing aid to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants or combatting racism and discrimination.

1. On what grounds did the authorities conduct investigations and arrests of NGO workers or former workers of the Tunisian Council of Refugees, Terre d'Asile Tunisie, Mnemty, and the Tunisian Association for the Promotion of the Right to Difference?

In at least two cases, that of the Tunisian Council of Refugees and of Terre d'Asile Tunisie, NGO workers were convicted and sentenced to prison sentences under vague provisions of the 1975 Law on Passports and Travel Documents amended in 2024, or the 1968 Law on

the Status of Foreigners in Tunisia, for provision of “illegal assistance to migrants and refugees.”

1. On what grounds did the authorities find that the work of these organizations—often carried out in conjunction with government entities or UN organizations—amounts to providing illegal assistance to migrants or refugees?

The authorities prosecuted and convicted members of the antiracist association Mnemty on charges of illicit enrichment and money laundering, including Mnemty’s president, Saadia Mosbah, who has been detained since 2024.

1. What prompted the investigation against Mnemty in 2024?
2. On what grounds did the authorities convict Mosbah and other members of Mnemty for money laundering and illicit enrichment?
3. In the case of Mnemty, could you provide details regarding the alleged money laundering and illicit enrichment—specifically, the amount and source of the allegedly illicit funds?

Pretrial Detention

Human Rights Watch research found that at least eight NGO workers and at least two individuals who worked with them were detained prior to trial, an “exceptional measure” under article 84 of Tunisia’s penal procedure code. Seven of them have spent more than 14 months in detention, the maximum period of pre-trial detention under Tunisian law. A 2025 Human Rights Watch report¹⁸⁹ found a pattern of systematic use of pretrial detention, even in cases of speech offences.

1. Why are judges routinely resorting to pre-trial detention in cases where there is no imminent risk of fleeing and possible alternative measures are available?
2. What steps is the Ministry taking in response to individuals who have been in pre-trial detention for longer than the maximum permitted under Tunisian law?
 - What remedies are available to detainees in such cases?
3. What steps has the Ministry taken to end this practice and bring the use of pre-trial detention in line with Tunisian and international human rights law?
 - In how many such cases has the Ministry taken action since 2021?

Under International human rights law, each case of detention should be subject to speedy and automatic regular judicial review.

¹⁸⁹ “All Conspirators” *How Tunisia Uses Arbitrary Detention to Crush Dissent* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/04/16/all-conspirators/how-tunisia-uses-arbitrary-detention-crush-dissent>.

1. What guarantees has the Ministry put in place to ensure that any detained suspect or defendant has access to prompt judicial review?
 - Does this take place within 48 hours of initial detention as generally required under Tunisian law?
2. What remedies are available to detainees in cases of unjustified refusal to ensure judicial review?
 1. What steps has the Ministry taken in response to cases of individuals who were not seen promptly by a judge?
 2. In how many such cases has the Ministry taken action since 2021?

Financial and Criminal Investigations

Human Rights Watch research has found that the authorities have launched financial and criminal investigations, including by the Tax Evasion Investigation and Prevention Brigade (BILEF) and the Complex Financial Crimes' Investigation Unit, against several associations registered in Tunisia, most of them since October 2024. These include prominent organizations such as I Watch, Mourakiboun, Amnesty International, Nawaat, Legal Agenda, and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. The investigations, which are still ongoing, after two years in some cases, are burdensome and pose a threat to the continued operation of these organizations.

1. What steps is the Ministry taking to ensure that such investigations are not being used arbitrarily or abusively against civil society organizations in Tunisia?
2. How many civil society organizations are currently under such investigations by the authorities?
3. For the aforementioned organizations, what prompted these investigations, and what evidence of alleged violations justifies them?
4. The associations investigated reportedly responded to the inquiries and provided the authorities with compliance documents and other records. What is the status of these investigations, and what are the next steps the authorities plan to take in this regard?

Racial Discrimination

On social media and in the media, individuals and organizations—particularly those that provide support to refugee and migrant communities—have repeatedly been the targets of stigmatizing and racist rhetoric, including by government officials, according to Human Rights Watch research. The Organic Law No. 2018-50 on the Elimination of All Forms of

Racial Discrimination combats all forms of racial discrimination and punishes any act or statement that constitutes racial discrimination.

1. What measures is the Ministry taking to ensure investigation of such incidents, to facilitate complaints regarding racial discrimination, and to ensure that anyone found guilty is held accountable?
2. What other measures is the Ministry taking to combat hate speech and stigmatizing remarks within public institutions and among government officials?

Law on Associations

The Tunisian government has announced since 2022 an intention to replace the current Decree-Law 2011-88 on associations.

1. Has your Ministry been consulted or involved in a proposed bill on associations intended to replace or amend the current law?
 - If so, could you provide more details about the bill and what prompted it?
2. Has your Ministry consulted with civil society organizations on this matter, or are any consultations planned?

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Annex IV: Human Rights Watch Letter to the Tunisian Ministry of Finance

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

July 21, 2026

Minister Michket Slama Khaldi

Ministry of Finance

Tunis, Tunisia

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

RE: Questions from Human Rights Watch on Civic Space in Tunisia

Dear Minister Slama Khaldi,

Please accept my regards on behalf of Human Rights Watch,
an independent international organization that monitors and reports on
violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in more
than 100 countries around the world.

We write with respect to a report we are preparing on the situation of civil
society organizations and their members in Tunisia. As part of this work,
we are seeking information on the current financial investigations against
associations.

We write to you, to respectfully request related information. Any written
response to our questions received by August 6, 2026 will be reflected in
our upcoming report. Please note that we may publish your response, in
whole or in part, at our discretion.

You can reach us at [REDACTED] for further information or clarification,
or to respond directly to our questions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your kind cooperation.

Respectfully,



Bassam Khawaja

Deputy Director

Middle East and North Africa Division

Human Rights Watch

ANNEX: Questions to the Tunisian Ministry of Finance

Financial and Criminal Investigations

Human Rights Watch research has found that the authorities have launched financial and criminal investigations, including by the Tax Evasion Investigation and Prevention Brigade (BILEF) and the Complex Financial Crimes' Investigation Unit, against several associations registered in Tunisia, most of them since October 2024. These include prominent organizations such as I Watch, Mourakiboun, Amnesty International, Nawaat, Legal Agenda, and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. The investigations, which are still ongoing, after two years in some cases, are burdensome and pose a threat to the continued operation of these organizations.

5. What steps is the Ministry taking to ensure that such investigations are not being used arbitrarily or abusively against civil society organizations in Tunisia?
6. How many civil society organizations are currently under such investigations by the authorities?
7. With regard to the aforementioned organizations, what prompted these investigations, and what evidence of alleged violations justifies them?
8. The associations investigated reportedly responded to the inquiries and provided the authorities with compliance documents and other records. What is the status of these investigations, and what are the next steps the authorities plan to take in this regard?

“We Are Living on Borrowed Time”

Repression of Civil Society in Tunisia

Tunisia’s 2011 revolution led to the emergence of a flourishing and active civil society. However, since the government’s authoritarian turn under President Kais Saied in July 2021, Tunisia’s civil society has been under threat as the government intensified attacks on national and international groups, their members, and representatives, escalating in May 2024. The implications for people’s rights are severe.

“We Are Living on Borrowed Time” documents how the Tunisian government is working to shutter civil society, and with it, one of the last remaining checks on Saied’s authoritarian rule. It documents the prosecution and arbitrary detention of dozens of people in apparent connection with their work, the weaponization of criminal and financial investigations against associations to silence and intimidate them, and mass arbitrary suspensions of associations that has put them at risk of dissolution. This is taking place amid official rhetoric demonizing civil society actors as well as the authorities’ attempts to tighten the current law governing associations.

This report calls on Tunisian authorities to end their crackdown on civil society, to free arbitrarily detained members of civil society and human rights defenders, and to stop restricting freedom of association. It calls on Tunisia’s international partners to urge the government, publicly and privately, to end its attacks on civil society groups and individuals and to protect space for civic groups to operate fully and freely in the country.



Tunisians hold up placards during a march organized by the Campaign Against the Criminalization of Civil Work to protest racism in Tunis, April 11, 2026. The demonstration, which includes human rights organizations, civil society groups, and activists, addresses concerns about what participants describe as a rise in racist rhetoric, as well as efforts to criminalize solidarity and civil, political, and trade union activities. The event also highlights concerns about the targeting of activists and advocates.

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