

Iran Seeks to Expand Its Influence in Tunisia

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The recent visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to Tunisia adds to the mutual decision to abolish visa requirements between the two countries, underscoring Iran’s strong interest in expanding its influence in North Africa in general, and in Tunisia in particular. For the leadership in Tehran, North Africa represents a highly significant geo-strategic region that allows Iran to advance a variety of political, economic, and security interests. Therefore, without a diplomatic move to prevent Iran from pursuing this goal, this trend is likely to intensify in the coming years.

The visit of Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to Tunisia on September 10 was another step in Iran’s efforts to significantly expand its influence in North Africa in general, and Tunisia in particular. It was preceded by a series of measures aimed at strengthening ties between Tehran and Tunis, culminating in the joint decision made in June 2024 to remove visa requirements for travelers from both countries. This development was accompanied by high-level visits, including the historic visit of Tunisian President Kais Saied to Iran in May 2024.

The leadership in Tehran views the expansion of its influence in North Africa, and especially in Tunisia, as a strategic goal of its foreign policy, based on the understanding that this trend can serve Iran in several spheres:

A. The Security Sphere

Iran’s presence in Tunisia (and in Algeria) enables it to intensify the security threat toward Morocco, which Tehran views as cooperating with the United States and Israel and as the most significant threat to its strategic partner, Algeria. As part of this perspective, Tehran has [even provided](#) military assistance to the Polisario rebels fighting for independence in Western Sahara. The strengthening of ties with Tunisia certainly serves this important objective. Moreover, given the severe deterioration in Iran’s relations with many European countries, its presence in Tunisia and especially its geographic proximity to Europe could serve Tehran well should it wish to increase its military threat projection toward the continent, particularly vis-à-vis states geographically close to Tunisia, such as Italy.

In addition, in light of [threats](#) by Iranian security figures to “close the Strait of Gibraltar” and the Iranian Navy’s ambition [to expand](#) its operations in the Mediterranean in order to threaten Israel from the west, a potential Iranian military foothold in Tunisia would greatly assist Tehran in building the foundation necessary to advance these goals. At the same time, a strong military presence in Tunisia could serve as a springboard for expanding Iran’s influence into Libya, in which it has a growing interest.

B. The Political Sphere

Iran seeks to expand its influence in African institutions mainly to counter Israeli efforts to broaden its diplomatic and security standing on the continent. Cooperation with Tunisia

(alongside collaboration with Algeria and South Africa) allows Iran to strengthen its political foothold in Africa, particularly in the African Union. At the same time, Iran's expanding circle of diplomatic relations supports the message it wishes to convey to both its citizens and the international community that diplomatic isolation is futile, as it can be broken relatively easily, as evidenced by its relations with Tunisia.

Furthermore, Africa plays an important role in Iran's broader effort to expand into the "Global South" (Africa and Latin America) within the framework of its "Look East" policy. This policy is designed to cope with its growing isolation by redirecting resources toward these regions. Accordingly, in recent years Iran has invested heavily in strengthening ties with Arab states, including those that have or had relations with Israel. Tehran appears to assume that Israel's conduct regarding the Gaza Strip and the United States' support for it have created fertile ground for deepening cooperation with Arab states, including those of North Africa. Iran's close relations with Algeria, which maintains deep ties with Tunisia's current leadership, have also helped Tehran draw closer to Tunis.

Moreover, Iran seems to view Egypt as a key state, especially due to its proximity to Libya. It is therefore working diplomatically to expand cooperation between Cairo and Tehran (including a symbolic step of renaming a Tehran street formerly named after President Anwar Sadat's assassin, Khalid al-Islambouli, to bear the name of Hezbollah's late Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed by Israel). However, despite the warming ties between the two countries, Egypt—like several other African states—opposes Iran's attempts to rekindle sectarian tensions within the country and to promote Shiite influence there. The expulsion of former Iranian diplomat Amir Mousavi from Algeria in 2018 on similar grounds serves as an indicator of this resistance.

C. The Economic Sphere

Generally, Iran seeks countries and outlets that will allow it to circumvent the sanctions regime imposed on it. Although economic ties between Tunisia and Iran were negligible in the past—Tunisian imports from Iran amounted to \$1.4 million in 2022, down from \$4.8 million in 2015; Tunisian exports to Iran fell from \$12.58 million in 2014 to only \$80,000 in 2023—the establishment of a joint economic committee between the two countries, agreed in April 2025, is an example of Iran's desire to use Tunisia to expand its economic ties and to bypass Western sanctions imposed on it.

D. The Religious Sphere

Although only a few thousand Shiites live in Tunisia, for Iran, their presence represents a platform for deepening its influence in the country. Algeria and Libya also do not have a significant Shiite presence, which is of particular concern to Iran, as it fears regime changes, especially in Algeria, could harm relations with Tehran. Accordingly, Tehran is trying to cultivate ties with the Shiite communities in Tunisia to establish influence there regardless of who rules the country. To strengthen its direct connection to Tunisia's Shiite population, Iran has opened cultural centers in Tunisia and is expanding the activities of Iranian institutions such as "Ahl al-Bayt."

On the surface, the strengthening of the rule of Tunisia's President Kais Saied would have been expected to hurt ties with Iran, due to the decline in status of the Muslim Brotherhood

movement (al-Nahda) and the authoritarian trend under his leadership. Still, his deep hostility toward Israel and the close relationship of his brother, Nawaf Saied, with Iran—and especially with Shiism (amid rumors that he himself is Shiite), alongside the tense relations between Tunisia and Morocco in recent years, have all created what the Tunisian regime sees as “fertile ground” for deepening cooperation with Tehran.

In the Israeli context, Araghchi’s visit to Tunisia is another example of the growing challenge Iran poses both politically and religiously. Although there is a tendency to focus primarily on the direct Iranian threats to Israel—the nuclear program, missile and drone capabilities, the regional so-called “axis of resistance,” and its proxies—this troubling trend, which intensified over the past year, should not be ignored.

Israel can advance several diplomatic measures in response to the worrying development in Tunisia–Iran relations. First, it can appeal to the US administration to use its influence with the Tunisian regime and demand that it reduce its ties with Tehran.

At the same time, Israel should work with moderate Arab states (Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia) and with European countries that have a strong interest in strengthening the stability of North African states, such as Italy. These countries, which are fundamentally wary of the expansion of Iran’s political and security standing in North Africa, should exert pressure on Kais Saied and his circle to take steps that will prevent Iran from expanding its influence in Tunisia. This should include a determined campaign against the institutions Iran has established in Tunisia that aim to cement a direct relationship between Tehran and the country’s Shiite communities.

Above all, the development in Tunisia–Iran relations sharpens the importance of the relationship Israel has cultivated in recent decades with Morocco, which is also leading the effort to combat the spread of Iranian influence in North Africa. Thus, it is highly important to deepen these ties and to plan a joint strategy together with additional countries to reduce Iran’s foothold in Africa generally and in North Africa in particular.

Given the growing tensions between Iran and the West (especially the United States, as well as Germany, Britain, and France, over disagreements about Iran’s nuclear program), it is likely that Iran’s desire to expand politically and militarily to additional countries around the globe, especially on the African continent, will intensify. At the present time, there is great importance in taking advantage of the end of the war in the Gaza Strip, which delayed cooperation between Israel and Morocco, and to step up efforts vis-à-vis Morocco and other African states in order to build an integrated strategy confronting Iranian involvement in the northern part of the continent and particularly in Tunisia.

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