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First UA: 52/23 Index: MDE 30/6815/2023 Tunisia of May 22, 2023

## **TUNISIA POLITICAL ACTIVISTS UNJUSTLY DETAINED**

Since February 2023, Tunisian authorities have opened criminal investigations against at least 21 people including political opposition activists, lawyers, and businessmen on unfounded accusations of conspiracy. Authorities have detained at least 10 people under this investigation including opposition figures Chaima Issa and Jaouhar Ben Mbarek as well as politician Khayam Turki.

Tunisia's anti-terrorism court is investigating them under 10 articles of the Penal Code – including Article 72, which mandates the death penalty for trying to “change the nature of the state”.

We call on the Tunisian authorities to drop the charges against Chaima Issa, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek and Khayam Turki and immediately release them as they are detained for exercising their human rights through activism.

### **Write to the President of the Republic of Tunisia urging him to:**

- Immediately release Chaima Issa, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek and Khayam Turki
- Drop all charges against them as they stem solely from the exercise of their human rights or peaceful dissent.
- Cease the authorities’ targeted arrests of critics.

### **Write to:**

President of the Republic Kais Saied  
Route de la Goulette  
Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie  
Email: [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)  
Twitter: @TnPresidency  
Salutation: Your Excellency:

### **And copy:**

Minister of Interior, Kamel Feki  
Email: [boc@interieur.gov.tn](mailto:boc@interieur.gov.tn)

Minister of Justice, Leila Jaffel  
Email address: [info@e-justice.tn](mailto:info@e-justice.tn)

Mr. Riadh NOURI  
Minister & Chargé d'affaires, a.i.  
Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia  
515 O'Connor Street  
Ottawa, ON K1S 3P8  
Tel: (613) 237-0330, -0332 Fax: (613) 237-7939  
Email: [at.ottawa@diplomatie.gov.tn](mailto:at.ottawa@diplomatie.gov.tn)

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Since February 2023, Tunisian authorities have opened criminal investigations against at least 21 people on unfounded conspiracy accusations.

At least 10 people are currently detained in relation to this investigation including politician Khayam Turki arrested on February 11; prominent businessman Kamel Eltaief arrested on February 11; dissident and politician Abdelhamid Jelassi arrested on February 12; lawyer and dissident Lazhar Akremi arrested on February 13; radio station director Nouredine Boutar arrested on February 13 (detained in relation to a separate case as well); opposition activists Chaima Issa and Issam Chebbi arrested on February 22; opposition activist Jaouhar Ben Mbarek arrested on February 24; and finally lawyers Ghazi Chaouachi and Ridha Belhaj arrested on February 25."

Chaima Issa is a prominent Tunisian activist and leading opposition figure in the National Salvation Front (NSF), one of the main opposition coalitions in Tunisia. She was arrested on February 22, 2023 while she was driving in Tunis with her sister and is currently detained in the Manouba prison, Tunis. In a separate case, a military court is also investigating Chaima Issa under Article 24 of the draconian [cybercrimes](#) Decree-Law 2022-54 for remarks about authorities made during a radio interview on December 22, 2022. The authorities have also barred her from travelling abroad.

Under international human rights law, civilians should never be tried before military courts and Tunisia's military courts lack independence as defined. If tried and convicted, she could face up to 10 years in prison under the decree-law.

Jaouhar Ben Mbarek is also a prominent Tunisian activist and one of the leaders of the National Salvation Front (NSF). Like, Chaima, he is also one of the founders of "Citizens against the coup", a political initiative critical of President Saied's 2021 power grab. He was involved in the organization of several protests in Tunis calling for the removal of President Saied and his government. He was arrested on February 24, 2023 and taken to Bouchoucha detention centre after security forces raided and searched his house. Prior to his arrest, police also briefly [arrested](#) his father Ezzedine Hazgui who is also a vocal critic of President Saied. Jaouhar Ben Mbarek is currently detained in Mornaguia prison in Tunis.

Khayam Turki is a Tunisian politician and director of a think tank named [Joussour](#) (Bridges). He also was the Secretary General of the Ettakatol opposition party before stepping down in 2015. In 2020, Khayam Turki's name was [suggested](#) by several political parties to Tunisian president Kais Saied to

become the next head of government. He was arrested on February 11, 2023 at his home in Tunis after security forces raided and searched his house. He is currently held in the Mornaguia prison in Tunis.

Since suspending parliament and claiming sweeping emergency powers on July 25, 2021, President Saied has [issued decree-laws](#) and overseen the adoption of a new constitution that grant him the [final word on judicial appointments](#) and the power to [dismiss judges summarily](#).

As of February 11, 2023, when the most recent wave of arrests began, courts have already investigated or prosecuted at least 32 people for the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of expression amid a [broader erosion of human rights](#) since July 25, 2021.

On February 14, 2023, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk [expressed](#) concern over the recent wave of arrests against civil society figures and perceived opponents as well as the Tunisian authorities' sustained attacks on the judiciary. A spokesperson for the commissioner specifically mentioned the criminal proceedings initiated against "perceived political opponents" charged with "conspiracy against State security". The commissioner called on the Tunisian authorities to "respect due process and fair trial standards in all judicial proceedings and to release immediately all those arbitrarily detained, including anyone detained in relation to the exercise of their rights to freedom of opinion or expression".

On February 22, 2023, President Saied [declared](#) that anyone who "dared to exonerate" what he described as "criminal networks" was, in essence, an "accomplice." This statement, coupled with the president's [arbitrary dismissal](#) of 57 judges in 2022, has contributed to a growing climate of intimidation of the judiciary.

On March 30, 2023, a Tunisian court [refused](#) a request for provisional release by lawyers of eight people detained under the "conspiracy" investigation, including Chaima Issa, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek and Khayam Turki.