

All Party Parliamentary
Group for International
Freedom of Religion or Belief



TUNISIA DELEGATION REPORT

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ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

NORTH AFRICA WORKING GROUP





l-r Mr. David Burrowes, Mrs. Portia Berry-Kilby, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP, Mr. Jeremy Barker, Mr. Miles Windsor, Rt Hon Lord Jackson of Peterborough

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THE APPG FORB AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

INTRODUCTION

Religious freedom is a foundational feature of stable, secure, flourishing societies. It also serves to strengthen societies against the excesses of authoritarianism. Religious freedom, where it is respected, acts to safeguard religious communities which exist as an important facet of communal and social life apart from the control of the state. Whilst some significant challenges to religious freedom exist in Tunisia, it is one of the less problematic countries in the Middle East and North Africa when it comes to the issues religious communities face and boasts a long tradition as home to diverse religious communities. That being said, with the re-emergence of authoritarianism, the decline of democracy and human rights, and the instability created by economic collapse, there is an increased risk of intolerance and persecution against religious communities.

The APPG on Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG FoRB) is a cross-party group of parliamentarians who believe that international freedom of religion or belief is a crucial human right. According to its mission statement, the APPG exists *“to raise awareness and profile of international freedom of religion or belief as a human right amongst parliamentarians, media, government and the general public in the UK; and to increase effectiveness and awareness of the UK’s contribution to international institutions charged with enforcing this human right.”*

“RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS A UNIVERSAL FOUNDATION STONE OF STRONG AND STABLE NATIONS. GOOD GOVERNMENTS RECOGNISE THE BENEFITS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TO THE NATION AS A WHOLE, AND THEY MAINTAIN AND ADVANCE PRINCIPLES, LAWS AND POLICIES THAT SECURE DIGNITY AND EQUAL CITIZENSHIP FOR EVERYONE.”

RT HON SIR STEPHEN TIMMS MP

In November 2022, the Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) facilitated the convening of a small group of parliamentary members of the APPG FoRB, as well as the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy and Deputy Special Envoy for FoRB. Following a discussion around religious freedom in Algeria, Tunisia, and the North Africa region more broadly, a consensus was reached to establish the North Africa Working Group (NAWG) for the APPG. The members in attendance at this meeting were Jim Shannon MP (Chairman of the APPG FoRB), Alexander Stafford MP, Taiwo Owatemi MP, Afzal Khan MP, Derek Thomas MP. Separately, the Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP and Lord Mark McInnes of Kilwinning also agreed to join the working group. Lord McInnes and Afzal Khan MP subsequently agreed to serve as co-chairs for the NAWG.

The aim of the NAWG is to investigate and analyse the conditions of religious freedom in particular contexts across North Africa and to work proactively and strategically to promote good practices, challenge violations, and encourage improvements and advances to religious freedom conditions. The NAWG seeks to engage with governments, civil society, and religious leaders in an effort to bolster secure, stable, and flourishing societies.

TUNISIA VISIT BACKGROUND

The NAWG agreed that they should engage with the Tunisian authorities to learn about religious freedom and peaceful coexistence in the Tunisian context and explore respectful and reciprocal support for the safeguarding of religious freedom in Tunisia during a turbulent moment in the country's history.

From 28th May to 2nd June 2023, a delegation from the APPG FoRB travelled to Tunis. The delegates were: Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP, the Rt Hon the Lord Stewart Jackson of Peterborough, Mr David Burrowes (the Prime Minister's Deputy Special Envoy for FoRB), Mrs Portia Berry-Kilby (then Director of the Secretariat, APPG FoRB), Mr Jeremy Barker (Director of the Middle East Team, Religious Freedom Institute), and Mr Miles Windsor (Middle East Strategy and Campaigns, Religious Freedom Institute).



The NAWG is not approaching Tunisia from a perspective that it performs particularly poorly with regard to religious freedom, but rather that it has a uniquely positive example to share of peace and dignity for all Tunisians when compared to most others in the MENA region. The delegation has in view the potential for Tunisia to safeguard and bolster this positive attribute and to be a prominent leader in the MENA region in advancing the ideals of peaceful coexistence.

The APPG delegation was informed in the days prior to the visit that the Tunisian Government and the Tunisian Parliament would be unable to meet with them despite having sought these meetings over a number of months prior to the trip. However, the delegates decided to proceed with an unofficial visit. The delegation heard from members of civil society, academics, and faith leaders who helped illustrate the religious freedom landscape in Tunisia. The delegation also met with the British Ambassador H.E. Helen Winterton and the United States Ambassador H.E. Joey Hood.

Further to these meetings, the delegation was privileged to have the opportunity to visit the Zaytouna Mosque, the Mosque Malik ibn Anas, the St Vincent de Paul and St Olivia Cathedral, the Grand Synagogue, and the Anglican Church of St George. Delegates also toured ruins of ancient Carthage, learning in particular about the extraordinary religious history found in this heritage site.

This report provides a summary of the themes arising from the delegation's time in Tunisia, including policy recommendations that followed from the meetings the delegates attended. The views expressed belong to those of the delegation and not those of the UK Government or APPG FoRB. The APPG wishes to thank the Religious Freedom Institute for conceiving, organising and coordinating the delegation.

POLITICAL OVERVIEW

Tunisia was widely considered one of the few “successful” transitions to democratic governance following the Arab Spring movement across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. In the years that followed, Islamic and secular political parties — and their supporters — clashed over the direction of the state following the revolution. The 2014 constitutional referendum established stronger protections for the rights of Tunisians and established the country as a Muslim civil state.

Tunisia nevertheless faced significant economic and security challenges following the Arab Spring. Deteriorating economic conditions led to increasing unemployment, inflation, and tax rates, further embroiling the population in a socioeconomic crisis. Tunisia's active civil society responded in large-scale protests and demonstrations.

It is in this context that Kais Saied was elected President of Tunisia in 2019 following a campaign largely focused on anti-corruption. Since his election, President Saied has sought to demonstrate strong leadership in response to the deepening socio-economic crisis and instability. On July 25, 2021, President Saied suspended the parliament and claimed executive control over the government, citing emergency powers afforded to him in the constitution. In September 2021, he suspended the 2014 constitution, which had been described as one of the most progressive constitutions in the Arab world. Many Tunisians welcomed the strong show of leadership as a necessary action to stabilise the country. Others claimed President Saied reinstated the very dictatorial and authoritarian control overthrown through the Arab Spring in 2011.

One year later, on July 25, 2022, a new constitution was approved in a national referendum, though with only an estimated 30 percent turnout. President Saied directly controlled the drafting of the new constitution, and the final text greatly expands the powers of the president and reduces the authority of both the parliament and judiciary. Freedom of belief, opinion, and publication remain protected. However, revisions to the state's relationship to religion through Article 5 of the 2022 constitution have evoked explicit concern about FoRB and the rights of religious minorities as well as secular Tunisians.



The constitution states that Tunisia belongs “to the Islamic Ummah” and mandates the state to achieve “the goals of pure Islam in preserving [people’s] souls, money, religion and freedom.” Whilst analysis would suggest that there may be little interest in the application of this article for the purpose of repressing religious minorities, the ambiguity of the wording represents a potential threat should there be a change in the political climate or the shade of national leadership.

In December 2022, President Saied held elections for a new lower chamber (Assembly of People’s Representatives) of the Tunisian Parliament, with much curtailed powers following the constitutional reforms. The new assembly of 154 members held their first session in mid-March. After taking the oath, the parliament elected Ibrahim Bouderbala to the role of President of the Tunisian Parliament, the equivalent of the Speaker.

There has been a regularity to the arrests of opposition political leaders and critics of the president and his political takeover. Since February, there have been over 20 such arrests. The most high-profile of these was the arrest of the octogenarian intellectual leader of the Islamist-inspired Ennahda Party, Rached al-Ghannouchi.

Additionally, President Saied was widely condemned by African and Arab-world governments for rhetoric in relation to the Sub-Saharan Africans present in the country.

Whilst there are some Africans in Tunisia illegally, usually in transit through to Europe, there are also many who are legitimately residing in the country for, amongst other reasons, studies at Tunisian universities or for employment opportunities. The stoking of tensions between Tunisians and Sub-Saharan Africans have compounded further the massive challenges of migrants departing from the coast of Tunisia, seeking to cross the Mediterranean to reach Italy. Irregular migration is one of the primary concerns for relations between Tunisia and European countries.

The Tunisian economy continues its freefall and it is possible that Tunisia may default on foreign loan repayments later this year. An IMF bailout agreement for \$1.9 billion stalled unexpectedly when President Saied stated that he would not accept “foreign diktats”, and suggested that subsidy cuts could lead to unrest. The rhetoric is in keeping with the Tunisian President’s hostile posture against Western engagement with Tunisia.



RELIGIOUS OVERVIEW

According to official figures, nearly 99% of the Tunisian population are Sunni Muslim and less than 1% of the population adhere to other minority faiths, including Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, and secular beliefs. Articles 27 and 28 of the 2022 constitution guarantee "freedom of belief and conscience" and protects "the free exercise of worship as long as it does not undermine public security."

Challenges to religious freedom have, nevertheless, persisted in the country. The Baha'i faith is not officially recognised. Other religious minority groups face significant challenges to official registration as associations. Social perceptions of religious freedom vary among Tunisians. Members of religious minority communities have reported discrimination and harassment, and some members of the Sunni Muslim majority have pushed back against efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance across society, including those efforts led or supported by Sunni imams and other religious leaders.

The Catholic Church is the only Christian denomination granted formal association permissions. A "Modus Vivendi" signed in 1964 allows the Catholic Church to function in the country and provides state recognition. However, it restricts religious activities and services to the physical confines of authorised churches, outlaws proselytism, and prohibits construction of new churches and the ringing of church bells.

A significant portion of the Catholic church in Tunisia is made up of Sub-Saharan Africans, including many university students and workers. Catholic priests reported that when the authorities are faced with problems with other Christian communities, such as allegations relating to evangelistic activities and conversions, the Government directs its complaints towards the Catholic Church as the only registered Christian community.





According to their oral history, the Jewish minority has dwelled on Djerba Island continuously for more than 2,500 years. The El Ghriba Synagogue has been in use for 2000 years. In the aftermath of World War II, the Jewish population of Tunisia has declined significantly since the 1950s due to various challenges and the hostile environment created by events like the Bizerte crisis in 1961 and the Six-Day War in 1967. The Jewish population in Tunisia, which was approximately 105,000 individuals in 1948, has now dwindled to around 2,000 individuals across the entire country. Many Tunisian Jews have chosen to emigrate to Israel and France. As of 2011, the Jewish permanent resident community on Djerba Island numbered about 1,000, but many return annually on pilgrimage.

Because of its Jewish heritage, Djerba has, on occasion, been a hotspot for terrorism. On 11th April 2002, Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for a truck bomb attack close to the famous synagogue, killing 21 people (14 German tourists, 5 Tunisians and 2 French nationals). A Jewish school on the island was firebombed during the national protests held in 2018, while security forces in Djerba were reduced, being preoccupied with protection efforts elsewhere.

Since Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, the Tunisian Government has extended its protection and encouraged Jewish life on the island of Djerba. Usually, the President or Prime Minister would attend the El Ghriba Pilgrimage in a show of solidarity and support.

This year around 5000 pilgrims participated in the events of the El Ghriba Pilgrimage. On the evening of 9th May, a terrorist attack occurred during the final day of the pilgrimage. At around 8pm, chaos erupted when a young security gendarme who had been investigated two weeks prior by anti-terrorism officials due to suspicions of religious radicalisation, killed a colleague and took his firearm. The young gendarme then proceeded to the Ghriba Synagogue, dressed in his National Guard uniform. He was not deployed in Djerba and had not been on duty that evening.

“THE DELEGATION WAS SHOCKED AND DEEPLY SADDENED BY THE ATTACK THAT TOOK PLACE ON DJERBA ISLAND ON 9TH MAY 2023, DURING THE JEWISH LAG B’OMER PILGRIMAGE. THE PILGRIMAGE IS, AMONGST OTHER THINGS, A CLEAR REPRESENTATION OF DIVERSITY, RESPECT AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE, AND A TESTAMENT TO THE HONOUR AND DECENCY OF THE VAST MAJORITY OF TUNISIANS.” **DAVID BURROWES, PRIME MINISTER’S DEPUTY SPECIAL ENVOY FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF**

Tunisian forces were quickly deployed to the scene and a fierce exchange of gunfire occurred after the terrorist opened fire on both security forces and worshippers. The situation was eventually neutralised, but not before five people lost their lives, including two Jewish worshippers (A Tunisian Jew and a Franco-Tunisian Jew) and three members of the security forces. Eight others were injured (four pilgrims and four members of the security services).



Throughout the trip the delegation had numerous opportunities for formal and informal engagements with civil society, academics, and religious leaders from various backgrounds and organisations, including those working in economic and social development, higher education, civic engagement, and human rights. Additionally, the delegation visited sites of historic, cultural, and religious significance. Finally, the delegation also engaged with the diplomatic missions from the United Kingdom and the United States to gain greater insight into how they are assessing relevant issues and what steps or opportunities they see in their effort to advance relations between their respective countries in the current climate.

ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS



In a roundtable meeting held on May 29, 2023, various stakeholders were brought together by Attalaki NGO, a Tunisian organisation that works to advance religious freedom and peaceful coexistence. The participants in the roundtable meeting included legal experts, academic researchers, religious representatives, and human rights advocates. The discussions primarily focused on the realities and challenges faced in implementing Tunisia's constitutional laws, particularly in relation to human rights and religious freedoms.

Participants highlighted the importance of tangible initiatives seeking to build societal respect for religious diversity while recognising the risks and challenges to religious minorities and other vulnerable communities. Concerns were raised about hate speech and incitement to violence. Additionally, there is a need to address ambiguities or deficiencies in the legal protection of religious freedom in the constitution and implementing legislation.



There were a number of practical challenges raised throughout the discussion. Participants highlighted issues around the legal recognition of religious groups and denominations. Many religious communities do not have legal recognition and this creates a sense of precariousness and limits their ability to operate freely and equally. There are also practical challenges relating to burial sites as many religious communities do not have sites in which they can inter their dead. Some religious groups have arrangements with recognised religious groups in order to share their burial sites. However, the lack of rights to a suitable space for each of the communities contributes to perceptions of indignity and inequality. It was also noted that there are examples of serious incidents of desecration and vandalism of graves.

"SOCIETY CANNOT BE GOVERNED SOLELY THROUGH LEGISLATION. RECOGNISING AND EMBRACING THE DIVERSITY WITHIN TUNISIA IS CRUCIAL FOR BUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE AND HARMONIOUS SOCIETY."

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANT

"EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW SHOULD APPLY TO ALL CITIZENS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS. DIVERSITY SHOULD BE SEEN AS A SOURCE OF GROWTH RATHER THAN A THREAT, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS MUST BE PROTECTED."

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANT

The meeting addressed the legacy of sharia courts which despite not being a formal component of the legal system is still drawn upon when there are ambiguities, ensuring the protection of minority rights. For example, the Baha'i community in Tunisia, with a history dating back more than 100 years, has still been denied a response to its request to establish a cemetery, despite multiple requests in line with Tunisian Law (No. 97-12 dated July 25, 1997). The community has not been granted any formal recognition status, a reality also shared by the Tunisian Protestant Christian community. Participants stressed that society cannot solely be governed through legislation and called for efforts to improve recognition and appreciation of Tunisia's diversity in its society.



Towards the end of the meeting, the participants were asked whether, in the current climate, they felt that the delegation should have visited Tunisia and met with civil society actors such as them and whether they had any concerns about such a meeting. They were asked whether more or less engagement with them and others like them would be preferred. The delegates received a very strong response confirming that the visit was not only encouraging but very important to those attending the roundtable. The attendees said that they wanted their experiences and opinions to be heard and that they were not concerned at present about potential consequences. It was agreed that opportunities should be taken to have such meetings while they had the freedom to do so.

"TUNISIAN CIVIL SOCIETY IS A DYNAMIC ASSET TO THE COUNTRY AND A REAL SOURCE OF STRENGTH. THE TUNISIAN AUTHORITIES SHOULD CONTINUE TO SUPPORT AND ALLOW SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS INCLUDING THOSE WITH A VISION TO ADVANCE PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND DIGNITY FOR ALL CITIZENS. WE WERE VERY IMPRESSED BY THE WORK OF ATTALAKI NGO IN PARTICULAR." **RT HON LORD STEWART JACKSON OF PETERBOROUGH**

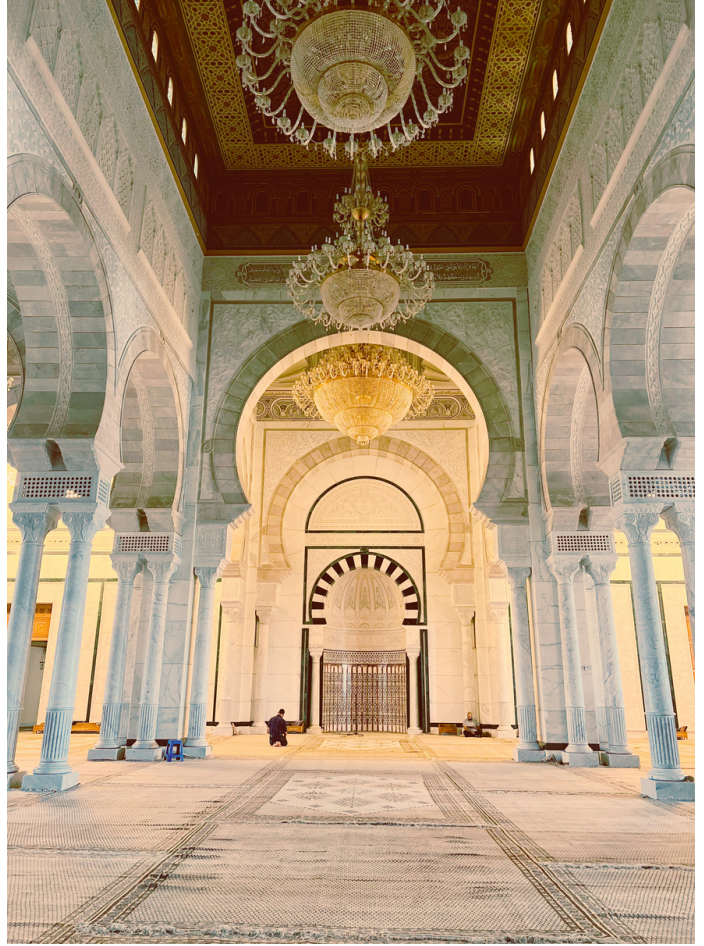
It should be noted very clearly and without equivocation that nobody that the delegation met with could be considered as in any way actively opposed to the Tunisian Government. Everyone that met with delegates was proud of their country and heritage, devoted to Tunisia's success, and committed to peaceful coexistence. It was not the focus or interest of the delegates to meet with dissidents or opposition figures. There remains a desire on the part of the delegation to continue to hold out a hand of friendship to the Tunisian authorities and to engage positively with Tunisia on shared interests and concerns relating to peace and dignity.

"ATTALAKI NGO IS DOING AMAZING WORK, WITH VARIED PROGRAMMING ON THE RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY OF TUNISIA AND PROMOTING PEACE AND RESPECT BETWEEN COMMUNITIES. BASED ON THEIR DEVELOPED APPRECIATION OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THEIR CONSTRUCTIVE POSTURE, AND THEIR ABILITY TO BRING TOGETHER DIVERSE COMMUNITIES, FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE, ATTALAKI IS A VERY IMPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM NGO." **DAVID BURROWES, PRIME MINISTER'S DEPUTY SPECIAL ENVOY FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF**

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM

The delegation visited some of the remarkable sites in and around Tunis and experienced a taste of some of the extraordinary richness of Tunisian cultural and religious heritage.

In the heart of the 7th Century Medina of Tunis, the Zaytouna Mosque is one of the oldest mosques in North Africa. It has served over centuries as a spiritual centre and an important educational institution. In addition to its religious and cultural importance to Tunisia, it is architecturally very beautiful and a surprising haven of peace in the centre of the hustle and bustle of the surrounding souk.



The Mosque Malik ibn Anas sits on a hill near to the Presidential Palace at Carthage and near the ruins of the ancient Basilica of Damous El Karita. One of the newer mosques, completed in 2003, it is a very grand mosque with a capacity for 1700 worshippers in the main prayer hall. It also serves as an administrative centre, including for Tunisians seeking to arrange their travels on Hajj pilgrimage.



St George's Anglican Church speaks of the historic British, European and American presence with many old gravestones belonging to 18th and 19th century diplomats and missionaries. Plaques inside the church, dating back many decades, honour British military personnel. The church's stained-glass windows depict Tunisia's Christian heritage, and saints of ancient Carthage. The minister of the church, Father Frank Bernardi, expressed his gratitude for the historic and ongoing freedom and dignity afforded by the Tunisian authorities to St George's and its vibrant multi-ethnic community.

It was very important to the delegates to meet with representatives of the Jewish community, especially given the attack that had only recently taken place at the Lag B'Omer pilgrimage on Djerba Island at the ancient synagogue of El Ghriba. The delegates expressed their condolences and solidarity with the Jewish community. They learnt about the history of the Jewish presence in Tunisia and their ongoing place in Tunisian society, if diminished in number. Leaders from the Jewish community shared about their ongoing efforts to continue to train and educate their young people. There was some concern expressed about increases in hate speech, in particular online, and they highlighted one example of a Tunisian actor who had made antisemitic statements and who was nevertheless able to travel to Europe and was, it was suggested, being engaged by the European Union, almost certainly unwittingly, for their projects.

The delegates had the opportunity to experience a tour of Carthage's ancient ruins, learning about the extraordinary Christian history associated with these sites. Delegates visited what had been a graveyard for Phoenecian (Carthaginian) children, possibly child sacrifices. They visited the ruins of an early Donatist church in a poor neighbourhood, identifiable as such by the number of kilns indicating manufacture of ceramics. There was a visit to the ruins of a large church in a wealthy part of ancient Carthage where the canon of the Bible was reputed to have been settled. There was an opportunity to go to the ancient theatre where Christians were martyred in brutal displays. There were a number of additional locations that were visited, each with an amazing story to tell about the early days of Christianity.

"TUNISIA IS A REMARKABLE COUNTRY. THE DELEGATION FEELS AS THOUGH IT HAS BARELY SCRATCHED THE SURFACE OF WHAT TUNISIA HAS TO OFFER IN TERMS OF ITS NATURAL BEAUTY, ITS HISTORY, AND CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS HERITAGE.

BASED ON OUR EXPERIENCE, THE PEOPLE OF TUNISIA ARE WARM, GENEROUS, AND VERY HOSPITABLE. IT IS A WONDERFUL COUNTRY TO VISIT. GIVEN ALL THAT TUNISIA HAS TO OFFER, WHETHER ANCIENT CARTHAGE, THE HISTORIC MOSQUES AND SOUKS, AS WELL AS DJERBA ISLAND AND ITS JEWISH PRESENCE AND HERITAGE, THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM IS EXTRAORDINARY."

RT HON SIR STEPHEN TIMMS MP



As impressed as the delegates were by the heritage of ancient Carthage, they also noted that signage and other forms of information about these sites was lacking. They observed that general care and maintenance of the sites was below ideal standards when compared to historic ruins of comparable importance and significance elsewhere in the world. They did, however, see huge potential for these and other cultural and religious sites to be a much bigger draw for international religious and cultural tourism if opportunities were taken to preserve, develop and safeguard these sites. This would also have a positive impact on Tunisian society - raising awareness of the diversity of Tunisia's culture and heritage, instilling national pride in those unique aspects of Tunisian history and contemporary plurality, as well as the obvious economic benefits additional tourism would offer.



REFLECTIONS ON DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

The delegation engaged in advance of the visit with and through the UK Embassy in Tunis to seek meetings with representatives of the Tunisian government, including the Ministries of Religious Affairs, Culture, and Tourism, along with the members of the recently elected Tunisian Parliament. In the days leading up to the visit, the UK Embassy had relayed the message from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the delegation that there would not be an opportunity to meet with Tunisian authorities as had been anticipated and strongly advising that the visit be postponed. Whilst greatly disappointed that these meetings would not be added to the agenda, the delegation nevertheless determined, at the advice and request of local organisations and partners, that the strategic value of the visit, including the meetings with civil society leaders and representatives of various religious communities, warranted continuing forward as planned. The delegation accepted that this would mean the visit would be “unofficial” and focus on engagement with civil society and the cultural and religious heritage of the country.

The delegation was pleased to meet with officials from the UK Embassy in Tunis at the Ambassador’s residence towards the start of the visit and then to meet with Ambassador Helen Winterton towards the end of the visit. Ambassador Winterton, since 2005, has held a range of posts in the Middle East and North Africa within both the diplomatic and development space for the UK government. The UK officials gave an overview of the current political landscape in Tunisia and some of the present dynamics that influenced their engagement with the Tunisian Government. It was clear from this conversation that the Tunisian Government is not engaging in normal ways with representatives of the UK Government or of other “Western” powers. This is in keeping with the public posture of the President of Tunisia. The delegation heard about some of the primary concerns and priorities of the embassy, as well as some of their activities, such as educational programmes supported through the British Council.



In both of the meetings it was apparent that the Ambassador and her team do not consider religious freedom to be a concern and have not substantially explored this as an issue beyond acknowledgement of the presence of some religious minorities. The Ambassador and the team shared about their visit to Djerba to attend part of the Lag B'Omer pilgrimage on the day prior to the attack that took place targeting the Jewish community. However, there was limited engagement or understanding of the dynamics for religious communities. It was felt by delegates that this was not, in many ways, unreasonable given that religious persecution and violations of religious freedom had not been manifesting in particularly dramatic forms, especially when compared to other parts of the MENA region. However, delegates felt that officials should note that in contexts where authoritarian leaders sought convenient scapegoats for their failures to resolve political and economic problems, both precedent and common sense would indicate that minority religious communities were at significant risk. This risk should prompt both a humanitarian concern in relation to the circumstances of targeted communities and practical concern regarding political stability and the movement of people, and the delegates felt that this should promote a proactive interest and strategic engagement at a point while this engagement is in fact still possible.



However, delegates expressed their concern that officials could not possibly be fully informed on the religious freedom dynamics in light of their very minimal engagement with religious and civil society leaders. The mission mentioned only limited interactions with religious communities, often occurring impromptu at official functions, such as with national leaders of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, who are both foreign nationals and leaders of established institutional denominations, and who expressed no concerns when they met with the Ambassador at functions at the Residence. These interactions will not give an accurate picture of the religious dynamics and FoRB landscape in Tunisia. UK officials expressed what, on one level, was a commendable concern and sensitivity towards these organisations and communities, not wishing to meet with them for fear of consequences to them. However, it was noted by members of the delegation that UK officials by not meeting with civil society actors, who had expressed a well-informed eagerness to meet, and advising the delegation from doing so were proactively, albeit unwittingly and with the best intentions, enacting the will of authoritarian leaders. This stance, in fact, is not neutral but rather has the potential to impact negatively on civil society by contributing to the further restriction of that space through the lack of engagement or “presence”. It was also considered concerning that such strong opinions and advice was given about the risk to civil society actors in Tunisia by the visit of the delegation, in an effort to persuade the delegation to cancel the visit, without any evidence of a clear precedent of consequences to similar organisations and communities, or the levels of engagement with this particular part of the civil society space that would give confidence that this advice was properly informed.





The delegation was very grateful to be invited and received by the US Ambassador, Joey Hood, at the US Ambassador's Residence in Sidi Bousaid. The US Ambassador is a highly-experienced career diplomat with many years of service at the State Department in key positions. Ambassador Hood gave a similar assessment to the UK Embassy regarding the political landscape and the posture of the Tunisian authorities to him and his officials. The US Ambassador did express a much greater level of awareness in relation to the importance of religious dynamics and religious freedom, calling the latter "a canary in the coal mine" in contexts where human rights were in decline. Ambassador Hood highlighted some of the US priorities in Tunisia, in particular in relation to the stabilisation of the economy and the promotion of positive relations between the US presence and the people of Tunisia. Ambassador Hood adopted a very different posture when it came to his methods of engagement. He provided examples of intentionally visiting active houses of worship during visits across the country, including many of the Catholic churches that so many Sub-Saharan Africans would attend, to express a very visible solidarity with these communities.

He also spent time with Jewish family members grieving the loss of those killed in the attack at El Ghriba Synagogue during the Lag B'Omer pilgrimage celebrations. There seemed to be much less anxiety about how his engagements would be perceived by the Tunisian authorities.

Ambassador Hood did mention that the US Embassy wasn't, at present, engaged in projects in relation to preserving and advancing religious freedom and peaceful coexistence. However, they are in contact with civil society actors working on these and related issues. USAID had just concluded a two-year project focused on building awareness of religious freedom and a culture of respect and religious freedom within Tunisian society. Additionally, Ambassador Hood highlighted that they are cognisant of how projects which may have a primary focus on agricultural development or economic empowerment can also serve as a bridge for building greater tools for political engagement and inclusion of diverse religious communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following represent selected recommendations from the delegation to various constituencies and stakeholders based on the observations made during the visit.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT

Sitting between Algeria and Libya, and a major North African gateway for migration to Europe, Tunisia is a key strategic concern for the UK Government. Religious freedom should be understood not as a fringe humanitarian issue in the Tunisian context, but one of the foundation stones indicating and contributing to the stability, security, prosperity and wider flourishing of Tunisia. The recommendations of the delegation to the UK Government are as follows:

1.1 Religious freedom should be better understood by those in the UK Government with an interest in Tunisia and the wider North African context as a policy priority. It is not simply a minority concern but also affects majority faith communities, and there are implications at local, national and regional levels when religious freedom is violated or restricted. The UK Government should consider further opportunities for training for their officials in London and Tunis on the subject of religious freedom and related dynamics.

1.2 The UK Embassy in Tunis, as with all UK embassies, should be encouraged where possible to engage proactively, meaningfully and strategically with religious communities and other civil society actors for the purpose of understanding the critical dynamics of religion in their context which invariably play a much more prominent role in the life, culture and politics of a nation than is perceived and understood by international observers. This requires meeting and speaking with a variety of religious leaders and communities to hear their experiences and concerns.

1.3 Further, with all appropriate concern to manage and avoid unnecessary and unacceptable risks, the UK Embassy in Tunis should engage visibly with religious communities. Visible engagement articulates the UK's awareness of their existence and concern for their wellbeing. In most circumstances engagement of this kind can contribute to the mitigation of the risk of religious freedom declines and violations.

1.4 There are many opportunities and options for the UK Embassy in Tunis, as with other UK embassies in the region, to develop strategic religious freedom programming in partnership with international and local NGOs with expertise in this area. These opportunities should be sought out and prioritised, in particular at a time during which this programming is possible.



“INTERNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS, INCLUDING OUR OWN, WITH AN INTEREST IN THE STABILITY AND SUCCESS OF TUNISIA SHOULD INVEST STRATEGICALLY IN SUPPORT OF THE WORK OF ATTALAKI, AS WELL AS THE EMINENT AND HIGHLY-INFLUENTIAL INTERNATIONAL NGO, THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INSTITUTE. THEIR INTELLIGENT AND STRATEGIC PROGRAMMING IS INVALUABLE IN ADVANCING THE CONDITIONS FOR STABLE, PEACEFUL, TOLERANT SOCIETIES AND NATIONS.”

**RT HON LORD STEWART JACKSON
OF PETERBOROUGH**

2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT

The delegates wish to express their ongoing desire for respectful, positive dialogue with the Tunisian Government and Parliament, to develop amicable relations, and seek ways to provide reciprocal support on these issues of peaceful coexistence in Tunisia. The interest in Tunisia with respect to religious freedom is not that the country performs badly, but rather that it has a uniquely positive example to share of peace and dignity for all Tunisians and can take steps to improve on this and further strengthen the country.

The delegation has in view the potential for Tunisia to safeguard and bolster this positive attribute and to be a prominent leader in the MENA region in advancing the ideals of peaceful coexistence. The delegation was extraordinarily impressed by the natural beauty of Tunisia, the welcoming warmth of the Tunisian people, the depth and diversity of Tunisian community, and the remarkable religious and cultural heritage of Tunisia. The recommendations of the delegation to the Tunisian Government are as follows:

2.1 Please be discerning in relation to the engagement of international actors including the North Africa Working Group of the APPG FoRB. Please recognise where outside interest is sincere, positive and respectful, and please respond with openness to this engagement. “The West” has at times in the history of our relations with North Africa given plenty of reasons for suspicion and reluctance, but not all Western engagement runs contrary or pose a threat to the interests of Tunisia. There is potential to forge new and better relations and to open discourse on matters of mutual interest.

2.2 Please act to advance peaceful coexistence, justice and dignity for all Tunisians. Please formally recognise and register a broader selection of religions and denominations, providing them with the full and equal benefits this recognition enables. Please also ensure all religions and denominations have suitable provision of land for the burial of their dead. This is a very small and inexpensive act on the part of the Tunisian Government but it would be of great significance to the sense of place and dignity of those affected. It would without doubt be an act that is received with great appreciation by these communities.

2.3 Please take all appropriate steps possible to safeguard the religious diversity and peaceful coexistence of Tunisian society through laws and policies which defend against prejudice and intolerance. Please develop and implement programmes which educate Tunisians about the religious diversity of their nation and which promote peace and honour for all Tunisians regardless of their religious identities.

2.4 Please consider creating a formal and regular platform for communication between the Tunisian Government and civil society actors including religious representatives, academics and NGOs with interest and expertise in religion and peaceful coexistence. These roundtables are a valuable way for open discourse between government officials and ministers, and religious communities. This ensures clear communication and understanding where sometimes these might be lacking, and they can build respect and trust between governments and representatives of religious groups and other civil society actors. These groups foster a sense of partnership in shared aims of achieving justice, equality, and dignity for all citizens.

2.5 Please consider the expansion of ambitions to preserve the precious cultural and religious heritage sites of Tunisia and develop the potential for religious and cultural tourism. Sites such as the ruins at Carthage, as well as others such as Zaytouna Mosque, and El Ghriba Synagogue, have global historic significance. They would be a prime attraction for local and international tourists if greater attention would be given to their maintenance, promotion, and the touristic offering. Tunisia could take the initiative and look at advanced ways of improving the touristic experience at such sites, for example through virtual reality (vr) and augmented reality (ar). This work would have some obvious economic benefits but also cultural and societal benefits as Tunisians learn more about their heritage, their diversity, and take pride in the unique plurality of Tunisian culture. There are many sources of funding internationally for this kind of endeavour.

2.6 Please consider how Tunisia might serve as a leader in the promotion and advancement of religious freedom and peaceful coexistence in the North Africa region and internationally. Tunisia is a very positive example by comparison and other nations could learn from Tunisia's model of respect and dignity. There are civil society actors, religious leaders, academics and others, both in Tunisia and internationally who could partner closely with the Tunisian authorities in the development of meaningful governmental leadership in this extremely important policy area.

2.7 Please assist the North Africa Working Group of the APPG FoRB to secure meetings with the relevant groups and individuals in the Tunisian Parliament, such as the President of the Parliament, Ibrahim Bouderbala, and the Rights and Freedoms Committee. This group would like to establish cordial and respectful relations with Tunisian authorities and open dialogue on these issues.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE APPG FORB

The visit of the NAWG delegation to Tunisia highlighted once again the value of strategic engagement from MPs, in collaboration with international and local civil society. Visits such as this express a powerful message of solidarity with individuals and communities around the world and open up new opportunities for collaboration and partnership to advance freedom of religion for all. Additionally, the engagement with diplomatic missions helps to provide a valuable window into the ways in which this right is or is not being recognised as a priority within various contexts. The recommendations of the delegation to the APPG are as follows:

3.1 The fundamental right to freedom of religion is a bedrock of stable, flourishing societies and the exercise of this right can serve as an important means of safeguarding a society from a descent into authoritarianism or the denial of other rights and freedoms.

"I WOULD RECOMMEND THAT THE APPG FORB'S NORTH AFRICA WORKING GROUP CONTINUE TO TAKE AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN TUNISIA AND THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM LANDSCAPE THERE. WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO ENGAGE POSITIVELY AND RESPECTFULLY WITH THE TUNISIAN AUTHORITIES."

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[3.1 cont.] We can seek to focus on the most dramatic and extreme examples of persecution against religious individuals and communities but we should seek to engage more broadly and strategically with this cause. As MPs committed to advancing this right, please seek to engage proactively with civil society and religious actors, as well as national leadership, to encourage the preservation of and commitment to religious freedom in periods of political or social transition and prevent backsliding in countries with a comparatively positive record with regard to respect for religious diversity.



3.2 The priorities and modes of engagement with respect to religious freedom vary widely across diverse contexts. As MPs, please work directly with the UK Embassy and other like-minded partners to ensure they are engaging proactively with religious communities and other civil society organisations to understand the religious dynamics and appropriately tailor policy and programmatic priorities.

3.3 Seek to utilise a broad range of economic, cultural, and educational programmes to strengthen understanding and respect for religious freedom including topics such as cultural heritage, tourism, and cultural exchange initiatives. These types of efforts could serve both to raise awareness of the diverse communities as well as provide important economic inputs to bolster the Tunisian economy.

3.4 Continue to engage through the NAWG in Tunisia and other key countries in North Africa such as Algeria and Egypt. Algeria has been a country of interest to the group and it continues to be a cause for serious concern in relation to the religious freedom of its citizens. Egypt is another hugely significant and important nation which provides a fascinating and complex picture when it comes to religious dynamics and FoRB challenges, and there are many other countries that demand interest and attention. The Religious Freedom Institute has committed to continue to provide their expert advice and support to the group as it continues to devote focused attention on North Africa.

