

TUNISIA

Snapshot

History

Throughout history, various powers - including the Phoenicians that founded Carthage in the 8th century BCE, Romans, Arabs, Ottoman Turks and the French - recognized Tunisia's territorial significance in the Mediterranean. Tunisia became a center of Arab culture and was assimilated into the Turkish Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. France colonized the region in the 1800s (assuming direct control over Algeria and ruling Morocco and Tunisia (1881) as protectorates, which meant there was a French resident-general and a French military presence). Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, and retains close political, economic, and cultural ties with France.

People

Tunisia is a predominantly Muslim country, although there have been Jewish communities in Tunisia for 2,000 years. Modern Tunisians are descendants of indigenous Berbers and later Arabs that assimilated into the population. Many Tunisians work in agriculture, which exports products including dates and olives to Europe.

Population: 10.5 million (est. 2010)
Major city: TUNIS (760,000)
Languages: Arabic (official), French
Religion: 99% Muslim (primarily Sunni), with small Christian and Jewish communities (each less than 1% of population).
Ethnic groups: Arabs and Berbers 98%, European 1%, other 1%.

Government

After Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, Habib Bourguiba led the country for three decades. In office, he increased his own powers, took a hard line against Islamic extremists, and worked to promote a secular agenda, including women's rights and free education. In 1987, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali became president and continued many of the same government policies. Although he allowed for more freedom of the press, he did not tolerate political opposition and won three elections in a row by 99.9% of the vote. Frustration over President Ben Ali's failure to enact political reforms - combined with repression of opposition leaders and frustrations over Tunisia's economic stagnation - led to street protests in December 2010. President Ben Ali resigned in January 2011 and went into exile in Saudi Arabia.

Sources: "Tunisia." *U.S. Department of State*. 22 September 2011. Web.

"Tunisia." *CIA World Factbook*. 4 October 2011. Web.

"BBC News - Tunisia Country Profile." *BBC News - Home*. 7 June 2011. Web.