

## **Tunisia and Its Relations with Israel Following the Arab Spring**

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**The Israeli discourse surrounding regional cooperation tends to focus primarily on the Gulf States and on security issues; as such, it often overlooks more moderate and pro-Western countries in the region, and alternative cooperation tracks that are more along civil and cultural lines. Israel should pay more attention to Tunisia, which constitutes an important geographical, historical, and political crossroads along the Mediterranean coast; which provides insight into democratization processes; which is home to an ancient Jewish community; and which may serve as either an enabling or inhibiting factor for the realization of Israel's interests in Africa. Despite the current political obstacles to relations between the two countries, there exists a precedent of positive relations and cooperation between Israel and Tunisia, and there is a possibility of expanding this cooperation in the future. Meanwhile, positive interpersonal, cultural, and civil relations should be advanced. These will assist future political relations, once changes occur in regional politics and progress is made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.**

### **A. Introduction**

Tunisia, a small North African country on the Mediterranean coast, constitutes a fascinating and important geographical, historical, cultural, and political crossroads. The country is considered to be the birthplace of the wave of protests and revolutions that spread throughout the region beginning in 2011, and its main success story. It serves as an example of religious moderation and tolerance, and a model for emulation – mainly social and legal – to its neighbors; at the same time, it has also served as a main source for recruitment to Islamist movements such as the local branches of al-Qa'eda and ISIS.

Israel should be interested in Tunisia for a number of reasons. First, being familiar with Tunisia's history and socio-political history allows for a more nuanced understanding of the processes that have brought it to be the most democratic regime among Arab states, and of the challenges facing a transitional democracy. Second, to this day there is an age-old Jewish community in Tunisia, which has ongoing relations with family and community members in Israel and Europe. Third, Israel has an interest in developing relations with Africa, and Tunisia can constitute either an enabling or an impeding factor for this strategic goal, given its location and its membership in the Organization of African Unity. Furthermore, there is a precedent of positive relations between Israel and Tunisia and of cooperation

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between them in the fields of agriculture, for example, and there is great potential for expanding this cooperation to additional areas, under the appropriate circumstances.

In general, the discourse in Israel regarding regional cooperation tends to focus on the Gulf States, and mostly on security issues, and does not give enough geo-political and social attention to North Africa. Consequently, this discourse often overlooks more open and pro-Western countries, such as Morocco and Tunisia, and opportunities for cooperation that is more civil in nature. The purpose of this article is to help change this trend.

The article begins by discussing the characteristics and trends in Tunisia since the Arab Spring and continues by presenting the joint interests of Tunisia and Israel, and possibilities for improving relations between them. Additionally, the article presents the Tunisian political system, the Jewish connection, prevailing attitudes in Tunisia towards Israel, and provides a context for current events in Tunisia and for present and future Tunisian-Israeli relations. The article is based on secondary sources as well as on a visit to Tunisia and interviews held with Tunisian nationals – mostly academics, politicians, and social activists.

## **B. Tunisia: Characteristics and Trends**

### *A Democratic Success Story?*

Tunisia is considered a unique success story in the Middle East and North Africa region, which without prolonged bloodshed brought about the expulsion, in early 2011, of dictator Zine al Abidine Ben Ali and the onset of a democratic process. While Tunisia is considered one of the most advanced among Arab States, it is still far from being a full-fledged democracy. Since its independence, Tunisia has promoted progress; nevertheless, it experienced more than two decades of a harsh dictatorship under a president accused of human rights abuses and widespread corruption.

According to Freedom House figures for 2018, Tunisia is defined as a "free country", receiving a score of 70 out of 100. For comparison purposes, Israel received a score of 79 and the US of 86. However, it is mentioned that beginning in 2017, Tunisia had been showing a decline in democratic processes, manifested by the repeated postponement of local elections (until they finally took place in May 2018, seven years after the previous elections), and the extension of the country's state of emergency by two more years. The shaky political and security situation in neighboring Libya and Algeria negatively affects the security and freedom situation in Tunisia. Additional examples of its retreating democratization trend are the inability to erect independent bodies required by the Tunisian constitution (such as the constitutional court), and various measures taken to limit the press.

Furthermore, many of the members and loyalists of the previous regime still constitute part of the economic and political elite in the country, and continue to influence the political system, directly and indirectly. One example is the national Reconciliation Law passed in parliament in 2018, which allows the government to give amnesty to former regime officials accused of corruption, if they acted as "part of their duty". Many citizens and dozens of parliamentarians opposed this law, claiming it allows to "rehabilitate" shadowy figures from Ben Ali's regime, marching the country backwards, and contradicts the transitional justice process the country is supposedly undergoing. Despite this opposition, the law passed with a majority of votes in the parliament, mainly due to the influence of old regime members.

*Moderate Islam and a Robust, Organized Civil Society*

Habib Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's governments (1957-1987; 1987-2011) boycotted, for years, any kind of Islamist activities. In spite – and perhaps because – of this, the Islamist a-Nahda party emerged as an important player in Tunisian politics after the 2011 revolution. Like in other cases of secular dictatorships and oppressive regimes, religious parties often constitute one of the major alternative voices. Accordingly, in the October 2011 elections in Tunis, a-Nahda won a large percentage of the votes (89 out of 217 seats), after putting forth a moderate national religious platform; subsequently, it was part of the government until 2014.

In December 2014, in the first presidential elections after the revolution, Beji Caid Essebsi, head of the Nidaa Tunis party, was elected president. Following a process of national dialogue that had begun already in October 2013 (and which will be elaborated upon below), and in light of the 2014 election results, Nidaa Tunis and a-Nahda formed a coalition that is still in power until today. In fact, the four most significant actors in Tunisian politics at present are Nidaa Tunis, a-Nahda, the employers' union (UTICA), and the workers' union (UGTT).

The UGTT is particularly interesting. It unites all workers' unions, and as such represents the Tunisian Left. On the one hand, this Left claims to be liberal and western in its views: it supports total gender equality, modernization, and secularization of the state. However, that same Left is also pro-Iranian in its leanings and loyalties, and as such is usually hostile to Israel. The following brief historical background can help clarify what on the surface may seem like a contradiction. The modern Tunisian Left was founded in 1968 in Paris, following a round of protests by young students who were members of the Tunisian elite. They adopted Trotskyist and Maoist ideologies, along with the French social model, and established an organization named "Perspective". A number of years later, president Bourguiba put an official end to the organization, though its members continue to be active through various Leftist parties such as the Communist Labor Party (POCT), or the Patriotic Democratic Party (WATAD). All these Leftist parties are represented today by the UGTT as an umbrella organization, which is represented in parliament by a small number of its leaders. While the UGTT has more than half a million members, only few of them hold a leadership position and political power within it. To demonstrate the Left's status, a public event took place in October 2018 commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historical founding of "Perspective" and the birth of the Tunisian New Left.

The Tunisian Left is connected to France and to French culture, and in line with the French ethos, it supports secularization and opposes religion. This usually gives the impression of openness and modernity, but often it is merely a strategy to preserve a privileged status. The Left exerts (and sometimes imposes) its influence through its control of the Workers' Unions and not necessarily through parliament. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and during the Iran-Iraq war, the UGTT supported Saddam Hussein, who was at the time the secularist, national, Arab leader who fought an autocratic Islamic regime. When, during the first Gulf war, the power of the Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath Party waned, the UGTT began supporting Syria – the then-regional power and leader of Arab nationalism – and the Syrian arm of the Ba'ath. Before long, the UGTT had adopted the Syrian anti-western rhetoric and the attitudes of Syria's ally, Iran. This explains the paradox of supporting liberal values and secularization on the one hand, and the Iranian and Syrian regimes on the other.

Since 2011, the Tunisian government has been involved in what is happening in Libya and Syria, which has sometimes been interpreted as "giving a green light" to fundamentalist groups connected with al-Qa'eda and ISIS. Since 2013, a Tunisian group named al-Hares

al-Qaumi (the National Guard) has formed strong ties with Hizballah in Lebanon and begun recruiting many young Tunisians to militias that support Assad in the war in Syria. The a-Nahda party, on the other hand, has been making efforts to appear as an open, moderate, and tolerant party. One example of this is the placing of a Jewish candidate in the 7<sup>th</sup> place on a-Nahda's list of candidates for local elections in April 2018 in Monastir, the birth city of President Bourgiba. The Jewish candidate did not end up being elected to the local municipality due to the success of many independent candidates, and yet placing him on the candidate list was an important symbolic step. In fact, the results of local elections showed a great deal of support for independent candidates, who do not represent any of the main political parties. This can be seen as an expression of voter dissatisfaction with the main parties. Voter turnout was low – only 34 percent of those who registered to vote (who are about half of those eligible to vote). The main issues affecting voting patterns were the economic situation in Tunisia and the widespread corruption in the country. On the other hand, topics such as secularization or Islamization were less important, mainly since Nidaa Tunis and a-Nahda were already partners in a coalition.

Civil society in Tunisia has always been active, especially in comparison to other countries in the region (although under Ben Ali it was closely monitored), but after the 2011 revolution thousands of new NGOs were founded. The UGTT is the largest civil society organization that has existed since before the revolution and which still fulfills an important role. Under Ben Ali, the UGTT was the umbrella organization of the regime's opposition, which was allowed to function under certain restrictions; it eventually operated as a tool of the regime, which wanted to appear tolerant of its opponents. Top UGTT officials received many benefits from the regime – similar to Ben Ali's party members under his leadership – for their work "on behalf of the regime". This harmed the UGTT's image and makes its job in today's Tunisian politics more difficult. The new organizations that were formed after the revolution have strong ties to the US and Europe, reflected in cooperation in training, in funding, and in capacity building. Two of the most important organizations are al-Bawasla (Compass) that strives for more political transparency and against corruption, and Nawat (Core), which deals with investigative media.

### *Rule of Law and Transitional Justice*

The National Dialogue that took place in Tunisia in 2013-2014 was organized by the UGTT, the Tunisian Federation for Human Rights (FTDR), UTICA, and the Lawyers' Association. Initial meetings between Essebsi and Rashed Ghannouchi, the leaders of Nidaa Tunis and a-Nahda, respectively, took place in Paris in the fall of 2013; following this, a series of meetings between secularists and Islamists took place in Tunisia. The initiative led to an agreement to hold elections and end the political crisis. In the elections that took place in October-November of 2014, Nidaa Tunis won 86 seats in parliament, a-Nahda won 69, and Essebsi was elected president. After the elections, Nidaa Tunis and a-Nahda formed a coalition (together with a third party, the Patriotic Free Union, UPL), and in 2015 the four organizations which had initiated the national dialogue won a Nobel Peace Prize.

The next parliamentary elections are now scheduled for fall 2019. Representatives of the UGTT have already declared their intention to run in these elections as independent candidates or as members of Leftist parties, while Nidaa Tunis and a-Nahda announced, on September 2018, that the coalition agreement between them had ended. This is not likely to affect the current government, especially since it does not lean on the balance of power in parliament but rather on confidential agreements inside the "consensus committee" (a non-elected body whose members include representatives of the Islamists and of the former regime). Nevertheless, it will have an effect on the next elections, when the parties run with

separate agendas, and will probably highlight the differences between them, as opposed to the slogan of “consensus” that had been prevalent in Tunisia since 2014.

Tunisia has a long constitutional history. Its first constitution was formulated in 1861, while the country was still part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1959, three years after gaining independence, the Tunisian state's first constitution was ratified. Immediately after elections to the National Constituent Assembly in October 2011, there began a long, challenging process of writing a new constitution that ended on January 26, 2014 with the adoption of a new constitution. The constitution states that Islam is the religion of the state and at the same time recognizes the freedom of conscience and belief, as well as gender equality. Since its independence, Tunisia had had a personal status law that was considered the most progressive in the Arab world: it included women's' right to vote, the outlawing of polygamy, a woman's right to divorce her husband, and the forbidding of a husband to divorce his wife without her knowledge and presence. In 2018 a new law passed that allows a Tunisian Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man (until then only Tunisian men had been allowed to marry non-Muslim women), making Tunisia the first Arab country to allow this. Furthermore, another law was proposed according to which inheritance would be divided equally between women and men, though as of 2018 it had not yet passed. These characteristics of Tunisia assist it in the international arena, especially with regard to the EU with which it holds a "Preferred Partnership" status, in spite of the historically complicated relationship and the legacy of French colonialism.

### *The Jews in Tunisia*

A small minority of approximately 1,500 Jews still lives in Tunisia, and continues to run community life, particularly on the island of Djerba and in Tunis the capital. The belief is that Jews first arrived in Tunisia in 586, with the destruction of the First Temple. Over the years, waves of Jewish immigrants joined them – first from Spain, and, after the Arab conquest, from the Levant as well. Jewish emigration from Tunisia was relatively mild between 1948-1956, but increased when Tunisia got its independence. Between 1954 and 1957, around 30,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, and following the 1967 war approximately 10,000 more left (most to France, and some to Israel). The El Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba was first established almost two thousand years ago (and has been renovated since), and is considered the earliest synagogue in North Africa that is still standing. It serves as an active synagogue and as an important touristic site for the Jewish community in particular, and for Tunisia in general.

For the most part, Jews in Tunisia were part of the pro-French elite from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, but that trend has begun changing in recent years, especially since the 2011 elections after the revolution. The Jewish community, especially in Djerba, began showing more conservative signs (though the community had always been conservative), and some of its members began voting for the conservative Islamic a-Nahda party. At the same time, several Jewish businessmen, mainly in the capital, still maintain tight ties with France. Tunisian Jews enjoy certain statist protections; like in other Arab countries, they have a certain degree of judiciary autonomy, mainly in all that concerns religion and family law. In synagogues and in areas where many Jews reside, there is constant police protection, especially since the beginning of Bel Ali's rule and more so after in 2002 a Tunisian-Frenchman committed a terrorist act outside El Ghriba synagogue, in which 20 people were killed and dozens injured. Incidentally, the attack, for which al-Qaeda took credit, had been planned by Khaled Shaikh Mohammed, the architect of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

Many of the Jews in Tunisia maintain ongoing relations with Israel, and their family members in Israel can occasionally get a visa to visit Tunisia (in addition to the visits for the *Lag Ba'Omer Hillulah*, detailed below). In the main synagogue in Tunis, practically all notices on the bulletin board are in Hebrew, and include information about artists' performances and current events in Israel, suggesting the community has ongoing relations with Israel.

### **C. Tunisia-Israel Relations: History, Interests, and Possibilities**

Relations between Tunisia and Israel, which began already in the '50s and intensified with the beginning of the Oslo process in the '90s, have never completely ceased. Until 2011, a few dozen groups of travelers, mostly consisting of Tunisian Jews, traveled from Israel to Tunisia every year. Even though at present it is prohibited to enter Tunisia with an Israeli passport, Israelis continue to arrive every year for the *Hillulah* of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Djerba during *Lag Ba'Omer*. In 2018, about 400 Israeli Jews (and a few thousand Jews from France and elsewhere) came for the *Hillulah*. This is a record number since the 2011 revolution (a year in which the Jewish community due to security reasons canceled the celebrations). 2018 was also the first year since 2011 in which there were no sweeping warnings by the Israeli government against visiting Tunisia for the celebration, due to waves of violence and terror in the country. The rise in the number of guests in the *Hillulah* in 2018 was welcomed by the Jewish community, whose economic situation had been negatively impacted by the uncertainty and waves of violence in Tunisia. Already after the terror attack outside El Ghriba synagogue in 2002, the number of Jewish and Israeli visitors had decreased, and since 2011 it decreased even further. The celebration and the participation of thousands of Jews in it every year is well known and covered openly by the Tunisian media, though the latter downplays the fact that there are Israelis, too, among the visitors.

Over the years several changes have taken place in Tunisia's attitude toward Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Palestinian case, and in the level of its involvement in these issues. In general, as in other Arab countries, the Tunisian people support the Palestinian struggle. Tunisia is the only Arab country that accepted – albeit retroactively – the UN Partition Plan of 1947. In a speech delivered in Jericho in 1965, Bourguiba expressed his support for the partition plan, claiming this would potentially bring about international support for the Arab struggle. In 1982 the PLO headquarters relocated from Beirut to Tunis, making Tunisia's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a more direct one. In 1985, there was a failed attempt to assassinate Yasser Arafat in Tunisia, and in 1988 Israel assassinated Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), the then-head of the PLO Military Arm in Tunisia.

In the early 1990's, during the first Gulf War, Ben Ali adopted an anti-Western rhetoric, yet at the same time the Tunisian government allowed an Israeli delegation to visit the country as part of secret talks with the Palestinians (which later became the Oslo Process). The peak of Israeli-Tunisian relations began in 1993, with the signing of the Oslo Accords, when both states held a dialogue channel in Belgium. In 1994 Yossi Beilin (then Minister of Justice and one of the Oslo initiators), and later Shimon Peres (then Foreign Minister) met with Tunisian officials and agreed to open Interest Offices in both countries. Tunisia's steps were a bit hesitant and low-profile (in comparison to this, in Israel the agreement was hailed as a major accomplishment), but the offices were finally opened in 1996 in Tel Aviv and in Tunis. According to the Moroccan model, the purpose of these offices was to advance mutual cultural and trade relations. Tunisian business persons used to get visas to Israel, which they would pick up at the Israeli embassy in Brussels. Indeed, during this time a number of Tunisian business persons developed trade relations with Israeli companies. The best-known case is when Salma Loumi (sister of prominent Tunisian businessman Faouzi Loumi) began importing irrigation systems from Israel. Until November 2018, Loumi, who is close

to President Essebsi, served as a Minister of Tourism. Tunisia's Foreign Minister, Khemaies Jhinaoui (who has served in office since 2016), headed the Tunisian representative office in Tel Aviv from the end of the 1990s until its closure in 2002.

The ease and rapidity with which the relations between Israel and Tunisia had formed attest to the relatively positive attitude of Tunisian officials, who did not hesitate to take the opportunity within the appropriate political climate, to develop ties with Israel. At the same time, they reiterated the fact that full diplomatic relations would be possible only with full Israeli withdrawal from territories conquered in 1967. Tunisia viewed itself, in accordance with Bourguiba's attitude, as a potential mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

During the 90s, when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process began collapsing, and especially with the rise to power of the political right in Israel, the Tunisian government was forced to slow down the process of normalizing relations with Israel, mainly due to pressure from public opinion in Tunisia and in the Arab world. In 1999, with the election of Ehud Barak as Prime Minister, a new hope was set that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would be signed, but this hope too soon dissipated. Ben Ali refused the American request to host an economic summit in which Israel would participate, but still did not completely sever ties with Israel. In February 2000, the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister visited Israel and held talks regarding economic cooperation between the countries. In October 2000, after the failure of the Camp David Summit and a few weeks into the Second Intifada, Ben Ali condemned Israel and said he would cut off ties with it.

In 2002, Tunisia finally closed its offices in Israel, but in 2005 the Tunisian government hosted an Israeli delegation that had come to participate in a UN meeting. Silvan Shalom headed the Israeli delegation, and even had the chance to visit Djerba and his parents' home in Gabes. In 2002-2011, ties between the two countries continued to be informal and on a back burner. As mentioned, Israelis continue to participate in the Hillullah and to visit relatives, although a number of recent terror attacks dissuaded many from coming.

Since the 2011 revolution, and despite the democratization processes in Tunisia, its stance regarding Israel and Jews has not improved much, and in some respects it has even worsened. This is expressed, among other things, in the regime turning a blind eye to anti-Semitic and Holocaust denial activities. On December 15, 2017, for example, an event commemorating the Holocaust was planned to be held in the National Library of Tunisia, but UGTT supporters blocked the entrance and prevented the event from taking place. Holocaust denial has become part of the official stance of Leftist parties in the parliament. Additionally, the UGTT tried to pass a law that forbids normalization with Israel, though both a-Nahda and Nidaa opposed the law, eventually preventing it from passing.

The hostility expressed by the Tunisian Left towards Israel stems largely from the Iranian influence and not only from the negative sentiments prevalent in the Arab world in general. The UGTT has adopted the Iranian regime's calendar, set by Khomeini, according to which certain days are dedicated to hostile activities towards Israel (such as Palestinian Shahid Day and Prisoners Day). The UGTT continues to actively support Assad's regime in Syria, and it officially supports the BDS Movement that calls for boycotting and sanctioning Israel. Since the UGTT has a monopoly on workers' unions – including the Union of Journalists – it has a great deal of influence over Tunisian media, through which it disseminated anti-Israel and anti-Jewish discourse through conspiracy theories and Holocaust denial.

Another example of the attitude towards Israel in Tunisia was provided by a candid-camera style television entertainment program, which is broadcasted throughout the Arab world during the month of Ramadan. In 2018, the program played a practical joke in Tunisia, in which actors contacted politicians, intellectuals, and arts and sports personnel, claiming they represented the BBC and Israel, and offered a large sum of money to anyone willing to work with Israel. On May 18, 2018, the statist TV channel of Tunisia published the names of those who had agreed to work with Israel/Is, intending to expose and shame them. This is an efficient way of politically and socially demonizing those who agree to work with Israel, and praising those who had refused (participants in this program had been selected purposely beforehand). In reaction to the broadcast, the Union of Tunisian Journalists published a pamphlet denouncing the program, mainly because it represented normalization of Israel. This example supports the following: first, there is still a social and political taboo in Tunisia against connections with Israel (whose source is mainly the discourse disseminated through, and occasionally imposed by, the media), and that challenging that taboo carries a price; second, in spite of the taboo and the negative rhetoric concerning Israel (or the “Zionist Entity”, as it is still often referred to), there are Tunisians who would be happy, or at least willing, to work with Israelis.

The taboo concerning contacts with Israel applies to the sports field as well. In April 2018, a Tunisian court prohibited four Israeli athletes from participating in the youth Tae Kwan Do championship, after a group of Leftist activists who oppose normalization with Israel filed a lawsuit against the president of the Tunisian Tae Kwan Do federation. They claimed that Tunisia was obligated to oppose the Zionist occupation and to boycott the Zionist Entity. In July 2018, the international Judo federation announced it would prohibit Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates from hosting two international tournaments, since they had not committed to ensuring that all contestants (e.g. Israelis) receive equal treatment, which includes the right to wear national symbols, fly the national flag, and sing the national anthem. Following the suspension, Tunisia and the UAE announced in early September 2018 that they accept the federation’s conditions and commit to allowing all countries participating in the matches to do so under equal conditions. Already in early 2018, under international pressure, Tunisia announced it would allow a 7-year old Israeli contestant to participate in the world chess championship for elementary school students, scheduled to take place in April 2019. From these examples, we learn that although there are those in Tunisia who support a general boycott of Israel, with mild international pressure it is possible to remove the boycott, thus allowing for cooperation in specific fields.

In Tunisian society there is a general atmosphere of suspicion, especially towards what is seen as American and Zionist conspiracies. This is related not only to Israel, but also to the character of the previous regime and to the present state in which “the walls have ears” and freedom of speech is restricted. In June 2017, an event marking the two-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks at Bardo museum, which was to include a memorial ceremony as well as panels with presentations on ways of dealing with radicalization and terrorism in Tunisia. At the last minute, the event was nearly cancelled and ended up taking place in a much smaller capacity. This was mainly the result of rivalries between the organizing bodies – the UGTT and the Tunisian Youth Organization – which included claims that the researchers invited from the US were Zionists (which was inaccurate, and in any event – irrelevant).

For the most part, in Tunisia there is a distinction between attitudes towards local Jews – who are considered an integral part of Tunisian society – and attitudes toward Israel as a political entity, generally considered an enemy. Occasionally, however, the boundaries between anti-Israel and anti-Jewish attitudes get blurred. Examples of this are the BDS and

Holocaust denial activities, which are encouraged by the UGTT and the journalists Union, who are both closely linked to the Iranian and Syrian regimes.

Tunisia is a signatory to the Arab Peace Initiative that was approved by the Arab league in 2002, and re-approved repeatedly since then. In other words, like other Arab countries, Tunisia too is willing to end the conflict with Israel and normalize relations with it after an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is reached and solutions are found to core issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, and borders. In spite of the indirect trade and security relations between Israel and a number of the Gulf States, and of peace agreements between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, Israel will not be able to achieve mutual and sustainable relations in the region – including with Tunisia – without meaningful progress in the peace process with the Palestinians. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, positive changes in the relations between Israel and Tunisia may still be possible. Under the surface, and in an undeclared and informal way, relations between the two countries – some of which have been mentioned above – are already taking place. It is possible that joint interests can upgrade those relations, and open new possibilities for widening and deepening them.

Geographically, politically, and economically, Tunisia is part of Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean Basin. Israel has interests in each of these regions, and Tunisia can constitute a bridge, a partner, a neutral factor, or an impediment to their realization. Advancing relations with Tunisia, at any level, can undoubtedly assist Israel in some manner to achieve its interests in those regions.

Israeli interests in Africa are mainly in the political, security, and economic spheres. In Israel, it is assumed that political moves in Africa – in addition to advancement of business ties with the continent – will reduce anti-Israel sentiments and possibly influence voting patterns of African countries in international fora. Thus, since 2016 there exists in the Knesset a lobby to promote Israel-Africa relations, and in a historic visit of Prime Minister Netanyahu to east Africa in July 2016 he praised the diplomatic ties between Israel and Africa. In the 51<sup>st</sup> summit of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that convened in Liberia in June 2017, Netanyahu spoke of Israel's desire to return to Africa, to advance initiatives that would bring mutual benefit, and to invest a \$1 billion in a plan to develop solar energy in Africa. Israel and Tunisia may have mutual interests in tightening relations with Africa, though this could raise some public objections in Tunisia, as has happened in Morocco.

Tunisia serves as a main land bridge for natural gas transported from Algeria to Europe (in exchange for which it received some of its gas supply from Algeria). Algeria has close ties to Iran, and a tight relationship exists between Tunisian president Essebsi (and the remnants of the Old Regime in Tunisia), and Algerian president Abdelaziz Boutefliqa. Thus, Tunisia's gas policy, like its policy on other economic and political issues, is influenced by Algerian and Iranian policies. Tunisia's official position is that the amount of gas it produces is negligible, while local media claims that in fact Tunisia produces a significant amount of gas, and that it has the most off-shore platforms among Mediterranean Basin countries, especially in the gulf of Gabes. While Israel currently has no interest in Tunisian gas, there may be a possibility for indirect cooperation through European companies (mainly British, Italian, and French). The main gas producer (and the biggest foreign investor) in Tunisia is British GAS, one of whose main competitors is the Italian ENI. At present, Italy is the main oil producer at El Borma, the largest and oldest oil field in south Tunisia. Israel has cooperation agreements with both the British and Italian companies, through which it may, in the future, be able to indirectly take part in projects to produce gas from Tunisia and Libya (through the provision of logistical services, know-how, and equipment, for example).

Realizing this potential is dependent on decent or good relations with Tunisia. Tunisia may also serve as a market, or a source of cooperation for Israel in the fields of agriculture and solar energy development. It is important to note that Tunisian-Israeli cooperation regarding irrigation and the drip system already took place in the late 90s.

Tunisia views tourism, including tourism centered around Djerba and the Jewish community, as highly important. As such, it values good relations with the Jewish community and reasonable relations with Israel that would allow the continued visits to Tunisia. Hosting thousands of visitors – including a few hundred Israelis – at the *Hillullah* each year, is an endeavor in which the Tunisian government is directly involved. This has a positive effect on Tunisia's image as an open and safe country, and thus on its general status as a tourist destination. Tunisia therefore has an interest in preserving, and possibly expanding, this endeavor. On November 5, 2018, René Trabelsi, a Jewish businessman from Djerba, was appointed as Tunisia's Minister of Tourism. Trabelsi has a rich experience in tourism, which includes bringing Jewish and non-Jewish tourists to Tunisia and to the annual *Hillullah* in Djerba, and advancing Muslim-Jewish relations. His father, Perez Trabelsi, is the president of a synagogue and has been among the heads of the Jewish community on the island since 1985. In the past, Trabelsi expressed himself against manifestations of anti-Semitism in Tunisia. Beyond his professional credentials and suitability for the job, it can be assumed that his appointment is also meant to convey a message by portraying Tunisia as a pluralistic country that treats its Jewish citizens with respect. In addition, the appointment may also bear another message, which is that cooperation with Israel in the field of tourism is not impossible.

## D. Conclusion

In Tunisia today, there are many expressions of progress and democratization; However, at the same time there are also bodies and trends that constitute hurdles for these processes. Tunisia's policy and its stance regarding Israel are influenced by internal processes, as well as by regional loyalties and rivalries. At present, Iran influences Tunisian media and subsequently its political discourse and mindset, alongside Tunisia's Preferred Partnership with the EU. Nevertheless, inter-state relations and the balance of power in the region change from day to day. The Tunisian people's sentiments, like those of others in the region, tend to support the Palestinian cause. Thus, without real progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Israel will not be able to advance official political and economic ties with Tunisia, and use these to realize regional interests. The lack of peace with the Palestinians serves as a constant justification for political, economic, and social measures against Israel. Nevertheless, over the years the two countries have had relations – either political or economic – that reached their peak during the days of the peace process of the '90s, during which time the two countries had official representative offices in Tel Aviv and Tunis. Israel has an interest in relations and cooperation with Tunisia, mainly due to its geopolitical position and it being an important player in the context of the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean Basin – all areas in which Israel has an interest.

Tunisia is important to Israel also because it is home to a Jewish community whose members have ongoing familial and cultural ties to Israel, and especially to Israelis of Tunisian decent. Many Tunisian Jews in Israel keep – or are trying to renew – ties with their families and communities, which translates mainly into mutual visits and economic initiatives. Trabelsi's appointment as Minister of Tourism sends a clear message that Tunisia appreciates its Jewish citizens, and possibly hints towards a future of stronger tourism ties between Tunisia and Israel.

Since Tunisians who express willingness to have contacts with Israel/is often face opposition and hostile reactions, it is not easy to find those who would officially declare such a willingness. Nevertheless, even under the current conditions it is possible to strengthen ties between the two countries in the field of tourism, and perhaps even through trade and indirect cooperation. There are politicians and business persons in Tunisia who have had good ties with Israel in the past; there are relations between Tunisian Israelis and their communities of origin; and recently the door has opened for Israeli athletes to participate in international competitions held in Tunisia. Perhaps this is a good place to begin and develop positive relations - not on the formal and declarative levels, but on an inter-personal level and through genuine cooperation. This way, once the political map changes and there is progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, there will already be a foundation of relations upon which to build.