

Looking at Tunisia from all Angles: A Congressional Newsmaker Series Conversation with Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT)

United States Institute of Peace

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Lise Grande: Good morning and welcome. My name is Lise Grande, and I am the head of the United States Institute of Peace, which was established by the U.S. Congress in 1984 as a nonpartisan, public institution dedicated to helping prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflict abroad. In fulfillment of its mandate, USIP is committed to promoting public discussion on issues of national security and on our foreign policy. The Institute regularly convenes diverse roundtables and bipartisan congressional dialogues on a wide range of topics from great power rivalry to countering violent extremism to promoting the American model of peacebuilding. The Institute is particularly proud to host the Congressional Newsmaker series, which welcomes elected officials to USIP for discussions on pressing and important issues. USIP is honored to welcome Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut for this year's first newsmaker conversation.

Our topic this morning is US policy toward Tunisia. Since 2011, when the Arab Spring started in Tunisia, perhaps no country in the Middle East or North Africa, has enjoyed so much support or goodwill in Washington. This goodwill, however, is rapidly evaporating. During today's discussion, we will be exploring why and what the US can do to help Tunisia get back on a democratic path. Senator Murphy was elected to the US House of Representatives in 2006, and to the Senate in 2012. He is chair of the US Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism. He is also a member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, and the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. Senator Murphy is one of our strongest defenders of international human rights and the need for clear eyed American leadership abroad. Along with senators from both sides of the aisle, Senator Murphy continues to argue that America needs to act now to address the threats to our national security posed by our adversaries. For more than a decade, Senator Murphy has also been one of the most important voices on Tunisia, both as a champion and more recently as a critic. We're honored to have you here today, Senator and with your permission, may we invite you to give remarks.

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, Lise it's wonderful to be here with you and I want to thank USIP for all of the tremendous work that you do to lift up our peacebuilding, peacekeeping, efforts to lift up American diplomacy and to give us a forum, policymakers, administration officials to try to work through some of our most difficult foreign policy conversations. And I'm glad to have a full room here today to talk about a very small country with an outsized impact on our debate about US role in the region and the future of democracy in the Arab world, Tunisia. I want to thank you personally for the help that you've given me and my maturation as a foreign policy leader. You and I, I can't remember how many times we talked about the crisis in Yemen as I was starting to build a coalition in the Senate, requiring us to step up and do the things necessary to support peace building there and I appreciate all the work that you did, making sure that we kept as many people alive as possible, over a conflict that lasted for far too long.

But we're here today to talk about a country which as you mentioned, for a long time was a real calling card for what was possible in North Africa, for what was possible in the decade after the Arab Spring, a country that seemingly had gotten it right and been able to transition from autocracy to democracy and given a voice to its people. I remember going there on our way to the Munich Security Conference shortly after the Arab Spring with Senator McCain, there was a period of time in which John was sort of touring me around the world. He took me under his wing for my first few years in the Senate and one of our stops was in Tunisia. We brought a big,

bipartisan delegation there to really celebrate the progress that Tunisia had made and to try to dream up new ways that the United States could support their transition to democracy, support the growing independence of their military and we left just full of hope for what the future would bring to Tunisia. Fast forward to my second trip there, just two years ago, I brought a handful of my colleagues there to meet with the new president, we were the first delegation to visit President Saied. I walked in concerned, but with an open mind and I left a two-hour meeting with Saied pretty well convinced that this was a country spiraling downward away from democracy. Saied in that meeting, talked a good game, he will, of course, is a student of history. He explains to our delegation, all of the lessons that Tunisia was learning from the American experience with democracy, and it was just that the version that Tunisia had adopted after 2011 was the wrong version of democracy and he was going to lead the country to a different democratic future, but a democratic future, nonetheless. But at the same time, as I listened to him, you saw all of the typical trappings of a sort of despot-in-waiting. I mean he was conspiratorial; everyone was out to get him right; we didn't understand how threatened he was and how essential he was to the future of the country. And I left much more concerned than when I arrived and unfortunately, all of my worst fears and many of our worst fears have come true since that visit in 2021. We'll go over the litany of decisions this Saied has made to effectively give up on democracy and the rule of law, but I think we are looking at a country today that, on its current path, has no real role for the Tunisian people in making a collective decision about the nation's future.

And the United States can't sort of continue business as usual, we've got to make some decisions about what our policy will be. The Biden administration has, you know, I think made a bet on the Tunisian military and we can talk today about whether that is a wise bet, I would argue that we should make a bet on civil society instead, and that we should be trying to do some significant things today to try to put power in the hands of the people rather than putting power in the hands of the military that has largely stood by, acquiesced and sometimes facilitated Saied's transition away from democracy. So, this is a critical moment, and I put it in a larger context, and I'll end here and then we can have a conversation. I think Joe Biden cares a lot about democracy. I think this administration has made it clear that they want to lead with American values. But at some point, in the region of the Middle East in North Africa, you have to walk the walk on democracy, not just talk the talk. And my concern is that whether you are looking at US policy towards the Gulf, Egypt, or Tunisia, we talked the talk on elevating democracy and human rights, but we don't necessarily always walk the walk. Despite 60,000 political prisoners in Egypt, the budget requests we get from the administration still call for 1 billion plus, in aid to that country, there's clearly been no reorientation towards the Gulf towards the Saudis or the Emiratis, and the budget requests we're getting for Tunisia, and the policy that we see from the administration, still basically look like business as usual. And, you know, people are noticing that we still stay in business with brutal dictators, we still fund regimes that move away from democratic norms, Tunisia at the top of the list, and I think it becomes hard to claim that your priority is democracy and human rights and the rule of law, if you don't change your policy, when governments start to change their commitment to participatory democracy, and I think you've got to put the conversation in Tunisia in that broader context.

Lise Grande: Senator in 2020, you made a statement where you said it's important when a country is taking steps toward democracy that the US supports them. A point you just emphasized now, that was only two years ago, and you're in a very different position now and Tunisia is in a very different position. At what point in those two years did you suddenly go no, lines up, time's up? The country has gone too far in this direction, and we have to take disciplining very strong steps to show our displeasure, and hopefully to incentivize the leadership to change course, when was that moment for you?

Senator Chris Murphy: Yeah, I don't know that there's one moment, but I certainly, as I mentioned, walked away from that meeting, feeling like I had a good idea who Kais Saied was, to the extent there was one moment after that it was likely the sort of sham referendum. Saied, obviously made a good pitch in the meeting, he said, as I

mentioned, listen, our prior version of democracy didn't work and there's not a lot of argument against that claim, right? I mean, Saied is popular today, he was even more popular back then, in large part, because the Tunisians had, sort of tested out democracy and they didn't love it, right, it wasn't delivering. And it's a reminder for us here in the United States that, you know, people support democracy because to them, it's the most effective way to deliver quality of life, right? Democracy holds this promise that it is a means by which to most fairly and broadly distribute resources, right. People, you know, don't have a philosophical commitment to democracy in so much as they believe democracy is the best way to protect themselves and their family. And Tunisia, they looked at the democracy they got, and it hadn't delivered for them. And so Saied comes along, and says, well I'm going to give you a different version of democracy, it's not going to be as a direct democracy as, you know, we used to have, but it's still going to be a democracy, and there's still going to be rule of law, there's still going to be protections. But then that promise he made simply didn't come true, right, he ultimately continued to grab power for himself, he continued to crack down on dissent. And then ultimately, he runs a referendum in which, you know, 11% turnout suggests that there's no broad buy in and so when that news arrived, it seemed pretty clear to me and that Saied continued to move forward with these changes, even with only 11% turnout that to me suggested that the fix was in that Saied was, you know, intent on consolidating power, notwithstanding the broad dissatisfaction with his reforms from the public.

Lise Grande: Senator, you talked about the importance of the US as one of the world's leading democracies for standing up for other democracies and aligning our foreign assistance in our actions with that principle, does that mean that when a country starts to backslide, we should immediately cut off assistance, cut off assistance in chunks, try and incentivize different kinds of behavior? What in practice does it really mean to support our principles with our action to align those more directly? What does it mean in general, and what does it mean in the case of Tunisia specifically?

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, Congress made a decision decades ago, that we were only going to be in business with countries that observed basic standards of human rights and participatory democracy, that's the Leahy Law, but the Leahy Law is observed in the breach, it's on the books, but administration after administration, wave it and wave it and wave it and wave it. And as I mentioned, I just think the world notices, I know the world notices, that we claim to prioritize human rights and democracy, but then over and over again, we fail to live up to that standard. No, I don't think you do it all at once, I think you give countries like Tunisia that are moving in the wrong direction, clear messages and signals, that our continued economic and military support is dependent on your continued commitment to the rule of law and to democracy, and that if you continue to move in the wrong direction, that there will be consequences. The administration has reduced, there have been consequences to Tunisia, there have been changes in the relationship, but I would argue that those changes have not come quickly enough and that this is the time, now is the time to make a more serious reorientation of our relationship. My feeling is that the better bet is on civil society, and that the military today has, as I think, shown its willingness to; a) stand on the sidelines and largely watch Saied consolidate power, and then often participate in that consolidation. And so, to believe that a continued major investment in the Tunisian military is the prescription for what will ultimately reverse course, I think, is probably naive. And so, to me, we should be likely reducing aid to the military given their decision to back Saied's consolidation of power, but we should be increasing support, or at least holding even support, for civil society and the budget requests we've gotten from the administration is the opposite. It's proposing holding even funding for the military, sort of teasing out that we might even increase support for the military, but cutting support for civil societies, cutting support for economic aid. I probably would suggest a strategy that reverses that funding.

Lise Grande: One of the distinguishing features of the Tunisian military over many decades has been its nonpolitical character. And in a region of the world where that's not always the case, Tunisia stood out, but you're

describing a situation where the posture of the military is changing, seems to be changing. What do you think's going on? Why is that happening now?

Senator Chris Murphy: Yeah, I don't think that I have the answer, but the military has had plenty of opportunities to sort of stand up to Saied and say that he's gone too far. You know, obviously, they took part in the decision to shut down the parliament, disband the legislature, it was Tunisian troops that were standing outside of the parliaments, barring the doors. That was a clear signal that the military was no longer going to sort of stand as an independent entity protecting the Tunisian people. You've seen this dramatic increase in the militarization of justice, that could not happen without the acquiescence of the military so, you've seen all sorts of troubling signs that the military has decided to integrate themselves into Saied's power grab. I don't know, the reasons for those decisions, but I think the United States has to sort of recognize that reality and listen, there are plenty of places in the region where the United States continues to make big bets on militaries as forces for stability. I've been a big believer in continuing US support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, but in Lebanon, the armed forces are legitimately out there every day protecting the Lebanese people, protecting their right to protest during the big protests during the pandemic and Lebanon, it was the military that protected the protesters. Fundamentally different than what's happening in Tunisia today in which the military is facilitating the crackdown on democracy and standing aside as Saied goes around and rounds up the leaders of the democratic, pro human rights resistance to that crackdown.

Lise Grande: Senator, you talked about how important it is, the arguments, for continuing economic assistance and of course, the US has been a strong supporter of the efforts by the IMF to negotiate a bailout loan that would help the country based on or contingent upon the country also doing some deep structural reforms. Now, those have been difficult negotiations, there have been successes, but more recently, it appears that the negotiations are stumbling. There are also signals that the country's leadership has reached out to the Gulf to no avail, debt financing does not seem to be coming from those sources. There are current indications that China has indicated that they would consider a bailout package, and even consider doing something China usually doesn't do, which is debt financing. If you could reflect with us on what the implications might be to the US and to the region, to the Mediterranean, if Tunisia and China become preferred partners with each other.

Senator Chris Murphy: So, I think this is something we have to watch very carefully. Tunisia is an important country. It has port assets that are vital to regional and global trade. We continue to have important reasons to have and maintain a security partnership with Tunisia for a long time, we saw a fairly remarkable number of individuals leaving Tunisia and joining extremist groups in the region, a much larger number than you would think, from a relatively small country and the intelligence that we gather in Tunisia matters to our fight against global terrorism. So, we have plenty of reasons both economically strategically and from a security perspective to continue to work on this relationship with Tunisia. But I think we have to think about the cost to China, ultimately taking on the burden of failed states that have no path for conventional IMF financing, countries that even the Gulf isn't willing to make a bet on. I get it that right now, we live in a world in which we perceive there to be zero sum politics between the United States and China, in which any place where China has more influence must come at a cost to US security. It may be though, that China is in the middle of overextending itself and making some pretty bad bets. So, query, if China is left doing significant debt financing with a handful of countries that have no legitimate access to the world banking infrastructure, is that a strength or a liability for the Chinese in the long run? If the United States and Europe get the relationships with the financially viable countries, and China gets the relationships with the countries whose economies are falling apart, is that good for China in the long run or is that good for the United States in the long run? I'm not saying you walk away and hand Tunisia to Chinese financiers right now, I still think we work with them, we try to get the IMF in there. we try to give them terms that are reasonable, but I don't think as a strategic matter, we should put ourselves in a race to the bottom with China. It

doesn't always mean when there's a Chinese offer on the table, that the United States or the United States and Europe have to give a better offer and maybe Tunisia becomes one of the test cases for that theory.

Lise Grande: Senator, you mentioned Europe and we know that a number of commentators in Europe have stressed the importance of controlled immigration from Tunisia. Obviously, recent experiences in Europe make them very sensitive to large scale migration. As the economy continues to stumble if it does, if there isn't a bail out, the possibility of larger numbers of migrants seeking stability and employment opportunities in Europe increases. Does this put us adjacent to our European allies on Tunisian policy? Does it mean that they would be pursuing a different set of questions as we pursue a more principled set of questions? What are your reflections on that?

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, you certainly seen, you know, countries in southern Europe, pushing harder on an IMF deal without conditions, and my guess is that they are looking for short term stability and security. In democracies, you're often looking for short term gain, but I would, you know, caution our friends in Europe to look at the long term and the medium term as well. Yes, the IMF could step in here with a deal with few conditions, that would patch things up for months, maybe years, but you'd be back in a crisis once again, you'd be necessitating another bailout, that would be even less palatable to international financial institutions a few years from now. And so, to me, we should work hard to get alignment with Europe on Tunisia and we should work hard to convince them that this is the moment to use that financing package as a mechanism to try to get this country back on the right path and if you don't do it now, it frankly, will be harder years from now when the economic crisis is even worse, when you've had two more years of economic mismanagement, political mismanagement, now is the time and I think we've got a little bit of work to do to convince all of our European friends that this is the time to drive the harder bargain.

Lise Grande: Senator, before we turn to questions from online and from the floor, if you were with President Saied right now, and he said to you, what signal can I send you that would rebuild your confidence and the direction I'm taking the country and my leadership? What would you say to him?

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, I think there's some very small steps that he could take immediately, I think one of the most worrying developments of the last several months is his decision to criminalize contact with US diplomats in Tunisia. Still today, there are activists and Tunisian citizens locked up, in part based upon their decision to talk to the US Embassy. That has to be a hard line for the United States, that action alone merits consequences. And one small step that the President could take is to release those individuals as a means of making clear that no one is going to jail because you talk to or you participate in actions, or dialogues taken by the US Embassy. So that to me would be a concrete short term step that the President could take to show that he is opening up this dialogue, but as we talked about, just before we took the stage, he has also decided to use this tried and true dictatorial tactic of locking up political opponents as a means to try to quell what is growing unrest. There are signs that the very powerful unions inside Tunisia, the Bar Association, human rights groups, have made the decision to come together and really build a national dialogue about an alternative to the vision that Saied has presented and he has met that unity of purpose, amongst his critics, with arrests and attainments, including the people I mentioned that had had contact with the US Embassy. So, I think that a decision to reverse course, and to release those political opponents is the clearest sign that he could show that he is making a commitment to the rule of law and an open dialogue about the future of his country.

Lise Grande: Senator, we had a question from one of our online participants that pointed out that the President remains, according to opinion polls, popular. So, if you have leadership that's moving in one direction, and the population supports it, what does the US have to say about that?

Senator Chris Murphy: So, as I mentioned, there's a reason why Saied is popular, not as popular today as he was when he first took power, it's because the democracy that preceded Saied's power grab was corrupt and ineffective and it is a reminder that democracy in and of itself is not the solution, only effective democracy. Saied has made a bunch of promises that have given rise to his popularity, but those promises are coming undone. And this is what we said to him nearly two years ago, when we met with him, we said, listen, you know you are popular today, you will likely be popular for the foreseeable future, but that popularity will vanish the minute that people figure out the promises that you have made about economic growth cannot come true according to the terms that you have set. So, I think you are going to see this bet the President has made go bad very, very quickly. And so, our sort of plea to him is to, you know, make these economic reforms today, side by side with democratic reforms as a way to save your country, but ultimately is, frankly, a way to preserve your own position and your own legacy.

Lise Grande: Senator, we had another question about a sensitive issue. We know that the African Union has condemned recent statements by the President, that were racist in nature about African migrants that were coming through Tunisia, their status. Do you have reflections on that? Certainly, the African Union was deeply distressed by it condemned it immediately.

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, this is Saied's version of the great replacement theory. That movements mainstreamed into American politics. Well, let's take a minute to reflect on ourselves here. I mean, I think it's kind of silly to have a conversation about, you know, any foreign country without understanding our own shortcomings. What Saied has said about South African migrants sort of corrupting Tunisian society is distasteful, it's wrong. The United States should use its moral authority and voice to push back on that narrative, but that narrative is present in American politics. It was midwived and espoused by our prior president and so this is another example of where our ability to push back on dangerous narratives abroad is compromised by our willingness to allow those very same narratives to become legitimized inside of our political dialogue. And so, yes, we should push back on the story that Saied is telling, but so long as we allow for that same story about Muslim migrants to the United States or Central Mexican, South American migrants to the United States corrupting American culture, it makes it very difficult for us to finger wag at Kais Saied.

Lise Grande: Senator, thank you. May we invite questions from the floor? Yes, please.

Ben Fishman: Hi Senator, Ben Fishman from the Washington Institute, more importantly, Hartford native and very jealous of your greeting the Huskies championship, for those who aren't familiar. But we're not here to

Senator Chris Murphy: listen, ask a question about

Ben Fishman: My five-year-old daughter knows that a Sanogo is number 21 so, anyway, we often talk about carrots and sticks leverage over other governments. Saied doesn't appear to respond to those. He doesn't want the IMF program and we're pushing on economic reform, economic bailouts. He's specifically said, you know, called the IMF diktats. And then, as you rightly pointed out, threatening our diplomats, and that which should be

egregious. So, what other points of leverage do we have over, as you say, an authoritarian would be or whatever, who's not responsive to our policies or policy demands? Thank you.

Senator Chris Murphy: So, listen, let's be honest, we have limited leverage in Tunisia, and we shouldn't pretend as if we have the tools that we need and this links into a broader critique that I have had for a very long time of US foreign policy. We have made it decision to hamstring president after president by giving them a military budget that is 20 times the size, or a military and intel budget, that is 20 times the size of the democracy, human rights and economic development budget that each president has. And so, what are we left with in Tunisia, we're left with an ability to fund the military, but very limited offers to make and very few tools to use when it comes to nonmilitary areas of influence. So yes, we have the IMF, and we've got the Millennium Challenge, but we've got a development bank that is largely irrelevant because of its size. China is able to come in and make these offers because it has an international development bank that is 20-40 times the size of US development financing institutions. And so, we're left to argue with international institutions about the terms that they provide because we have no capability to do that unilaterally. Second, Saied dominates the information space, dominates the information space.

When we came into Tunisia a couple of years ago, we had a hard time getting meetings with the opposition because the information ecosystem was polluted with this narrative about the United States and the Muslim Brotherhood and Inada being one, right and so I came into the country and find out that I was an agent of a political party in Tunisia that I had never met. But that was because Saied and allies, and those that were trying to undermine the United States, perhaps from the Gulf, owned the information space in Tunisia. And we had no effective means to push back because what do we have, the Global Engagement Center, which is funded at a pittance compared to what other nations' information capabilities are funded at. And so another decision we could make as a country is to dramatically upscale our ability to fund truth tellers around the world in places like Tunisia, not US messaging, but US support for domestic narratives and fact checkers and objective media sources that can tell the real story, which is that the United States is in fact, not an agent of Inada, not an agent of one Inada member who lives in Washington DC, as the story was when we arrived. So we've just made this continued collective decision to give away leverage because we fund the military at a level that gives them everything they need, and funds, anti-disinformation efforts, economic development efforts, pro-democracy and pro human rights efforts at a level that constantly leaves them wanting compared to the funding levels for the forces that they are aligned against.

Bill Lawrence: Bill Lawrence, American University, I drive through Connecticut on the way to Massachusetts all the time. So I wanted to, I missed the first couple of minutes so I know you sort of began to touch on what I'm talking about, but my colleague says not as far as I'd like to take it, so the coups in Sudan, the Burkina Faso coup, Mali, there was a there was a wave of coups, Guinea, you know, right over to Sudan, during the same period, where Saied did his president, what I call the presidential coup and we were very quick to cut off assistance in those cases, and we're unable for Tunisia, a major non-NATO ally and you know, for strategic reasons and you can argue, well, it's too little too late right now to suspend aid, an MCC is effectively suspended, they need the IMF financing. There will be cuts and assistance and the earmarks going away is probably a bigger deal, but we don't seem to be getting through to Saied for the reason Ben Fisher was talking about and we haven't said enough about the psychological profile of this president, but one thing I know from having worked on the Libya desk and Tunisia desk at state back when they were dictatorships, you couldn't always control with dictators said or did, but you could jolt them due attention and sometimes take actions, but the actions had to be dramatic. So why not consider a temporary, you know, Sudan like suspension of all US assistance for a month, you know, or that kind of thing, sort of jarring action that doesn't say we're giving up on you as our ally, but this won't stand rather than the sort of middling things and non-actions and other actions that don't really jolt them to have a reaction in Tunisia. The other thing I would say is, and I don't think you probably mentioned this, but it's also worth

mentioning that our lack of attention to Tunisian democracy is now infecting Libya. And we're more and more like, well, the US this backing Saied, which is the narrative in the region, the US is backing Saied, you know, then we don't have to really go back towards democracy, and I was wondering if you had anything to say about that.

Senator Chris Murphy: 100% and I did sort of try to put this in context in my opening comments, which is that our decision to sort of stay with Saied, our decision to wrap our arms around CC, our decisions to deliver really no meaningful consequences to the Saudi and the Emirati behavior over the last half a decade, of course, has consequences outside of the confines of those bilateral relationships, of course, the world looks at this and says, you know, United States doesn't really care about democratic norms and the rule of law. And if we have a good mil-to-mil relationship, we can probably keep them out of our business when it comes to democracy and governance. And that's what you'll hear is that, oh, you know, notwithstanding all the terrible things that Saied says about us, you know, the mil-to-mil relationship is still good, right? We still talk to those guys. People figure that out. People figure out that model and ultimately, that's not good for the United States, you know, in a world in which the fight for the next 50 years is the fight between an autocratic model that is, frankly, just much more attractive than the one midwifed by the Soviets and the democratic model, which is hurting today. So, yes, obviously, this matters in Libya, it matters in Turkey, it matters throughout the region and to your first point, listen, this is what I'm here to argue. What I'm here to argue is that this is a moment for a much more significant pivot when it comes to the amount of financing that we provide to Libya, and that we have got to, excuse me to Tunisia, that we've got to deliver a pretty forceful message now, both for practical purposes internally, but for broader messaging in the region in the world.

Elizabeth Hagedorn: Hi Elizabeth Hagedorn, Al-Monitor. I'd like to follow up on this idea of using US aid to incentivize Saied. Were the US to reduce military assistance, as you suggest, I'm curious whether you think that would actually impact Saied's behavior or the decision making up those around him?

Senator Chris Murphy: I don't know the answer to that question. I think there is a continued moral and strategic cost to providing significant levels of assistance to a country that has turned its back on democracy and human rights, a country that is locking up individuals for communication with the US Embassy. So, whether or not a reduction in military financing changes Saied's behavior, I still believe it is in our interest to make that change because of the impact it has on our broader fight to support democracy around the world. I just think there's a moral cost to the United States when we stay in business with leaders that are turning away from democratic norms. We don't know the details of Tunisia's talks with China, I think for a long time Saied was playing us off against the Gulf and had hopes that the Gulf would deliver. It appears that, for the time being, our Gulf partners have decided that they're not interested in being part of a bailout unless there are reforms. And, you know, we'll see about the kind of offer that Tunisia gets from China, but you know, when Saied and his people get down into the details of it, they may find it to be pretty unpalatable and it may cause them to come back to the table with the United States and Europe and the IMF. And so, I think that this is the moment to drive a harder bargain with Saied, the combination of driving that harder bargain and his coming to terms with the potential enormous downside of doing a debt financing deal with China could end up with a restart of significant and productive discussions with western financing institutions.

Lise Grande: Mr. Senator, a final question.

Shaun Tandon: Thank you, Senator. Shaun Tandon, a journalist with AFP. You've touched on the IMF issue quite a bit, but I wanted to ask you a bit more directly. What do you think can be done and should be done right now with the IMF deal? Do you think there's a way to leverage it to put more pressure on Saied or do you think

that that's not something that's effective? And also getting back to what you were saying about the administration placing its bets with the Tunisian military through the Senate through funding, do you see that changing at all? Do you think there's a way for that to be changed? Thanks.

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, if I believed that the Tunisian military was a true independent institution, then I'd be supportive of continuing our funding levels. I just don't believe that the Tunisian military is independent enough to deserve the continued level of support that they're getting from the United States today. In particular, you're seeing the dramatic increase in the use of military courts to come after Saied's political opponents. That development alone shows us that the military has decided to take Saied's side in one of his most important crackdowns on civil society. I will not claim to you to be involved in the weeds of the IMF discussions with Tunisia about the terms of the bailout, but as I said before, I think this is a moment in which you need to demand reform in order to get a deal with the IMF and I think if you don't demand those terms today, and just put off that tough discussion for another few years, it will be an even more impossible discussion, two or three years down the line. So, this is a moment where I think you've got to demand both economic and political reforms in order to get that deal with the IMF. And again, I think there's a chance that the terms China will offer will prove to be pretty unpalatable so I don't think it is outside of the realm of possibility that we can still do a deal between the IMF and Saied, despite the things that he's saying today.

Lise Grande: Mr. Senator, we're at the end of the discussion, are there final reflections you'd like to share with the audience?

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, you know, back to this question of why have we treated Tunisia differently? Why didn't Tunisia get a sort of quick cut off? Part of it is that Saied is incredibly charismatic. Saied tells a very good story, having spent time with him privately about how, you know, he will deliver democracy to the Tunisian people, but just on a different platform than what had come previously. And I think we have wanted to give that promise that he continues to make time. But the other reason is that we held Tunisia up for a long time, it is our success story in the region. It was an investment, a narrative investment that we made as a nation and as a transatlantic alliance, the success story of Tunisia, amidst all of this disappointment in the region, following the Arab Spring. And we are disappointed that Tunisia didn't stay on this path towards democracy, but to me it is coming back to this broader conversation I want our country to have our failure to even get the smallest country in the region on a path to democracy suggests that our democracy toolkit is fundamentally broken. That our inability to keep even little Tunisia, on a path to democracy tells us that something is broken inside of our foreign policy toolkit. And that's why I will continue to argue that our decision to have more employees of military grocery stores than we have diplomats in the State Department is a really, really bad bet for the United States going forward. And so, I wish we weren't in this situation that we are today. Much of the blame lies at the feet of President Saied, but we need to take ownership as a country for the mistakes we've made in the way that we have resourced president after president, essentially deciding to refuse them the capacities that they need in order to grow democracy and protect democracy around the world and I think that when we step back, and have a full discussion about what has happened in Tunisia, and what has happened with the US-Tunisia relationship over the past few years, it's a story about Saied, it's a story about the failure of Tunisian democracy, and Tunisian political leaders to deliver for their country. But it's also about a failure of American foreign policy to provide the support for nascent democracies and democracy movements around the world that they desperately need, as opposed to the level of support that we are able to deliver to militaries around the world when they come calling to the United States and I hope that we put this story of Tunisia inside that broader context.

Lise Grande: Mr. Senator, thank you for your commitment to peace and stability around the world, for your promotion of democracy and for being one of the most trusted voices in the United States on foreign policy and national security. I hope everyone joins me in thanking the Senator.