



Freedom on the Net 2016 - Tunisia

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 14 November 2016

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2016 - Tunisia*, 14 November 2016, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5834006fc.html> [accessed 24 October 2017]

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Country:	Tunisia
Year:	2016
Status:	Partly Free
Total Score:	38 (0 = Best, 100 = Worst)
Obstacles to Access:	10 (0 = Best, 25 = Worst)
Limits on Content:	8 (0 = Best, 35 = Worst)
Violations of User Rights:	20 (0 = Best, 40 = Worst)
Population:	11.1 million
Internet Penetration:	49 percent
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	No
Political/Social Content Blocked:	No
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
Press Freedom Status:	Partly Free

Key Developments, June 2015-May 2016

- A new mobile provider launched operations inside the country in late 2015. Lycamobile, a mobile virtual network operator, will be operating on the infrastructure of Tunisie Télécom (see ICT Market).
- A new counterterrorism law passed in August 2015 outlined a maximum of five years in prison for those found to have "publicly and clearly praised" a terrorist crime, its perpetrator, and groups connected with terrorism (see Legal Environment).
- The new counterterrorism law requires security and intelligence services to obtain judicial approval prior to engaging in surveillance and communication interception in terrorism-related cases (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).
- A number of journalists and ordinary users were arrested on terrorism charges for nonviolent speech posted online. Nouredine Mbarki, editor of the news site *Ekher Khabar Online*, was arrested for publishing a photograph showing a terrorist attack in Sousse, while mathematics teacher Abdelfatteh Said spent seven months in prison for alleging on Facebook that the attack was a conspiracy carried out by security forces (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).
- News site *Inkyfada* was forced offline by a cyberattack that came a few days after it reported on the "Panama Papers" leaks detailing international tax havens (see Technical Attacks).

Introduction:

Internet freedom in Tunisia in 2015-16 was marked by the passage of a new counterterrorism law that had mixed repercussions for free speech and privacy online.

The law contains some positive provisions, such as providing journalists with immunity from prosecution for refusing to reveal sources when reporting on terrorism. Although the press code contains similar protections against imprisonment, journalists have been targeted under the penal code in the past. Journalist Nouredine Mbarki was charged with "complicity in terrorism" for refusing to reveal to the authorities the source of a photo he obtained depicting a terrorism suspect leaving a car right before killing tourists in a beach resort on June 26.

As the government continues to grapple with increased terrorist attacks, authorities have resisted calls to reinstitute blocking and filtering. Instead, officials have declared their intention to work together with social media companies to combat violent extremism. Digital rights activists have expressed fears over surveillance now that the Technical Telecommunications Agency (ATT) is up and running, lacking a clear mandate and oversight mechanisms. However, certain provisions within the antiterrorism law provide an important check on authorities when conducting surveillance during the course of terrorism cases.

The online landscape changed dramatically with the ouster of autocratic president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. His repressive censorship apparatus largely dissipated and internet users have started to enjoy an unprecedented level of open access. Despite these slow reforms to Tunisia's legal environment, internet freedom remains threatened by a number of laws dating from the Ben Ali era, including the Telecommunications Code and the Internet Regulations. The judiciary continues to restrict free speech through the prosecution of users over content posted online, mainly regarding defamation, religion, and insults to state bodies. A high school student was charged with defamation over Facebook posts critical of the police. Several other Tunisians were detained or suffered legal harassment on vague charges.

Obstacles to Access:

Growth in mobile internet subscriptions has underpinned an increase in internet penetration in Tunisia over the past year. A new operator, Lycamobile Tunisia, entered the market in late 2015 offering low-cost calls and data plans. However, the telecommunications market remains dominated by three major players, with state-controlled Tunisie Télécom continuing its monopolistic control over the internet backbone.

Availability and Ease of Access

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration stood at 48.5 percent at the end of 2015, up from 36.8 percent five years earlier.^[1] As of March 2016, there were more than 7 million mobile data plans, compared to some 517,440 fixed broadband subscriptions. Of these data plans, more than 1 million are purchased for use on 3G-equipped mobile phone devices, while 1.1 million are for internet connections through 3G USB keys.^[2] USB keys used for 3G internet cost at least TND 40 (approximately US\$20.5), while the service costs TND 25 (US\$13) per month for 10GB of data.

The number of computers per 100 inhabitants rose from approximately 12 in 2009 to 22 as of 2015,^[3] while the number of internet subscriptions (fixed and 3G USB keys) is estimated to have exceeded 1.7 million over the same year.^[4] The popularity of mobile phones is also on the rise, with over 14.7 million mobile phone subscriptions and a penetration rate of 130.7 percent as of March 2016.^[5]

A number of Tunisians access the internet at privately owned cybercafes known as "publinets," where one hour of connection costs at least 1 TND (US\$0.51). Before 2011, wireless access in cafes and restaurants was not permitted by law, which allowed only licensed ISPs to offer access. Nonetheless, since the revolution it has become common for cafes and restaurants in major cities to offer free internet access without any registration requirements, attracting mainly young social network users. The ICT ministry issued new regulations on the provision of internet access by cybercafes on July 29, 2013.^[6] These regulations do not require users to register or to hand over identification documents, nor do they require owners to monitor their customers' activities. The ICTs ministry has registered a slight decrease in the number of cybercafes across the country, due mainly to a growth in the number of users accessing the internet through 3G data plans.^[7] As of March 2016 there were 261 cybercafes, compared to 271 one year earlier.

Fixed-line internet subscribers must first buy a landline package from Tunisie Télécom (TT), which manages the country's 180 Gbps bandwidth capacity, before choosing one of 11 ISPs. The TT landline package costs 45 TND (US\$23) for a three-month subscription period. ISP prices range from TND 10 (US\$5) a month for a connection speed of 1 Mbps to TND 50 (US\$25) for a connection speed of 20 Mbps. Although there are no legal limits on the data capacity that ISPs can supply, the bandwidth remains very low and connectivity is highly dependent on physical proximity to the existing infrastructure.

Restrictions on Connectivity

The Tunisian government does not impose any restrictions on ICT connectivity. However, Tunisie Télécom remains the sole manager of the country's 10,000KM fiber-optic internet backbone. Tunisie Télécom also acts as a reseller to domestic ISPs, granting it an oversized role in the country's internet governance. However, some positive signs have emerged of late. In September 2014, private operators Ooredoo Tunisie and Orange Tunisie inaugurated their own international submarine cable, thus easing the monopoly of Tunisie Télécom on Tunisia's international submarine communications cables.^[8] The 175km long cable which links Tunisia to Italy is the first privately owned cable to enter into service in Tunisia. 4G is expected to be officially launched this summer, and the three main operators are required to cover at least 20 percent of the territory in one year,^[9] including two marginalized interior regions.^[10]

ICT Market

The main providers of internet service are Tunisie Télécom, Ooredoo Tunisie, and Orange Tunisie. The state controls a 65 percent stake in Tunisie Télécom, while the remainder is owned by Emirates International Telecommunications (EIT). In June 2013, EIT announced a plan to sell its shares in Tunisie Télécom, citing employees' strikes over higher salaries as a reason for the move – however no action has yet been taken.^[11] Ooredoo Tunisie is a subsidiary of the multinational company Ooredoo, which is partially owned by the state of Qatar. Finally, Orange Tunisie has been controlled by the state since 2011, when a 51 percent stake was seized from Marwan Ben Mabrouk, son-in-law of fallen dictator Ben Ali. The remaining 49 percent stake is owned by the multinational group Orange.

A new operator, Lycamobile Tunisia, entered the ICT market in late 2015. Lycamobile is an international mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) which provides low cost rates for domestic and international calls and data services.^[12] The operator was allocated a five-year renewable license and will be exploiting the infrastructure of Tunisie Télécom. According to media reports, three other companies applied for licenses to operate mobile virtual networks.^[13]

Regulatory Bodies

The Ministry of Communication Technologies and Digital Economy (ICT ministry) is the main government body responsible for the ICT sector. The National Instance of Telecommunication (INT) is the regulator for all telecom and internet-related activities and has the responsibility of resolving technical issues and disputes between actors.

The INT's governance body is made up of mainly government officials nominated by the ICT Minister, which activists argue leads to a lack of regulatory independence. Nevertheless, the INT has initiated some positive changes in internet policy, namely through the introduction of a more liberal domain name chart and an invitation to independent arbitrators from civil society to help develop a new Alternative Domain Name Dispute Resolution Process.

Internet policy is decided by the INT and executed by the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI), a state body governed by a board of trustees comprised of representatives from the main shareholder, Tunisie Télécom. The company controls 37 percent of ATI shares and the state owns a further 18 percent, while the remaining 45 percent is divided among private banks. The head of the ATI is appointed by the ICT ministry. The INT and ATI manage the ".tn" country domain. Under Ben Ali, the ATI was a government organ for surveillance and censorship. The ATI now manages the internet exchange point (IXP) between national ISPs that buy connectivity from Tunisie Télécom, as well as the allocation of internet protocol (IP) addresses.

Passed in December 2014, government decree n°2014-4773 regulates the granting of business licenses to ISPs.^[14] Under the new decree, ISPs are subject to prior authorization from the ICT ministry, after consulting with the ministry of interior and the INT. Article 8 established a new advisory board tasked with examining licensing requests and advising on matters related to infractions and sanctions. The board is presided over by the ICT minister or his representative and is composed of representatives from the ministries of defense, interior, ICT, and commerce; the INT; and the Union for Industry and Commerce (UTICA). Businesses wishing to apply for a license need to have a standing capital of at least TND 1 million (approximately US\$520,000). Licensing applications must be answered by the ministry within one month.

Limits on Content:

Tunisian users continue to enjoy an open internet. However, in the absence of legal reforms, laws regarding censorship and intermediary liability from the Ben Ali era continue to pose a threat to free expression online. As the authorities continue to grapple with mounting terrorist attacks, more attention has turned to the fight against online extremism.

Blocking and filtering

Censorship remains sparse in Tunisia, with no instances of politically motivated blocking over the past year. Popular social media tools such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available.

Despite calls by several politicians and media commentators to censor web pages affiliated with terrorism, there were no indications the authorities took concrete action. In June 2015, Telecommunications Minister Noomane Fehri has stated he "will not adopt a policy of blocking websites whatever their danger to us because we believe this solution is technologically useless."^[15] As of mid-2016, there was no evidence that authorities were filtering terrorist related content, but legal actions against users posting such content are very common.

Content removal

While authorities admit filtering "won't solve the problem" of users accessing extremist content, the telecommunications ministry has revealed it is coordinating with social media companies to suspend pages that incite violence or extremism.^[17] Google noted it received one request in the second half of 2015 and took action to remove the post, which was classified as defamatory.^[18] No removal requests were sent to Twitter.

Under laws inherited from the dictatorship era, ISPs are liable for third-party content. According to Article 9 of the 1997 Internet Regulations, ISPs are required to continuously monitor content to prevent the dissemination of information "contrary to public order and good morals." There is no evidence that laws such as these have been used to take down political or social content from June 2015 to date.

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Tunisia's online media landscape is vibrant and open. Since the revolution, numerous online sources of information have been launched alongside new newspapers, radio stations, and television channels, enriching the information landscape through the addition of viewpoints from a diverse range of social actors. Nonetheless, Tunisia's post-revolutionary vibrancy has not eliminated all self-censorship. Some users might still avoid crossing certain red lines on topics such as religion, the military, and security institutions over fears of legal prosecution. Still, users are more open to discussing these sensitive issues on the web compared to traditional media platforms.

Digital activism

Tunisian youth and civil society organizations have continued to use digital media for initiatives relating to political and social issues. In July 2015, users launched a campaign demanding better internet speeds and lower prices, prompting the regulator to release a statement urging operators to improve their quality of service and listen to their subscribers.^[19]

Since the revolution, pro-LGBT rights groups have been taking advantage of the opening up of the internet to raise awareness and to campaign for the decriminalization of homosexuality.^[20] In September 2015, following the sentencing of a young man to prison for homosexuality, LGBTI groups stepped up campaigning both online and offline against article 230 of the penal code, which punishes homosexuality with three years in jail.^[2]

Violations of User Rights:

While Tunisia has taken significant steps to promote internet access and reverse online censorship, the country's legal framework remains a significant threat to internet freedom. Despite the adoption of a new constitution hailed as "democratic,"^[22] the absence of legal reforms continues to hold Tunisia back. Most problematically, the judiciary continues to employ laws from the Ben Ali-era to prosecute users over online expression. Criminal defamation remains one of the biggest obstacles to independent reporting, while several users have been charged with defamation.

Legal environment

The 2014 constitution, the first to be passed since the 2011 revolution, enshrines the right to free expression and freedom of the press, and bans "prior censorship." Specific articles guarantee the right to privacy and personal data protection, as well as the right to access information and communication networks.^[23] However, the text contains vague language tasking the state with "protecting sanctities" and banning "takfir" (apostasy accusations). Such language could act as a constitutional restriction on internet freedom, where religious issues are currently debated more openly than in the mainstream media or on the streets.

Despite improvements to the constitution, the repressive laws of the Ben Ali regime remain the greatest threat to internet freedom. Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code states that anyone found guilty of "using public communication networks to insult or disturb others" could spend up to two years in prison and may be liable to pay a fine. Articles 128 and 245 of the penal code also punish slander with two to five years' imprisonment. Article 121(3) calls for a maximum punishment of five years in jail for those convicted of publishing content "liable to cause harm to public order or public morals". In addition, Tunisia's code of military justice criminalizes any criticism of the military institution and its commanders.^[24]

Decree 115/2011 on the Press, Printing and Publishing provides protections to journalists against imprisonment. However, Tunisia's press code does not provide bloggers and citizen journalists with the same protections afforded to traditional journalists. Article 7 defines a "professional journalist" as a person holding a BA degree who "seeks the collection and dissemination of news, views and ideas and transmits them to the public on a primary and regular basis," and "works in an institution or institutions of daily or periodical news agencies, or audiovisual media and electronic media under the condition that it is the main source of income." In addition, authorities continue to use the penal code and the antiterrorism law to prosecute journalists.^[25]

In August 2015, the parliament adopted a new counterterrorism law to replace a 2003 law used by the Ben Ali regime to crack down on critics and opponents.^[26] The law outlines a maximum of five years in prison for those found to have "publicly and clearly praised" a terrorist crime, its perpetrator, and groups connected with terrorism.^[27] Chapter five outlines surveillance and communication interception practices in terrorism-related cases. To monitor and intercept suspected terrorists' communications, security and intelligence services need to obtain judicial approval in advance for a period of four months, renewable only once (also for four months). Article 64 punishes unauthorized surveillance by a year in jail and 1000 TND (US\$ 450). Under the new law, the authorities cannot prosecute journalists for not revealing terror related information they obtain during the course of their professional work.

The ICT minister announced his intention to introduce a draft cybercrime law for parliamentary review in August 2015. After parts of the law were leaked in 2014, reports showed the bill included problematic provisions extending criminal defamation to digital media.^[28]

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Several users were arrested or prosecuted against international norms of free speech over the past year:

- On July 8, 2015, authorities charged Nouredine Mbarki, editor of the news site *Ekher Khabar Online*, with complicity in terrorism under the 2003 anti-terrorism law for publishing a photograph showing Sousse beach attack gunman Seifeddine Rezgui leaving a car before he started shooting tourists on June 26.^[29] The photograph was removed by the site less than an hour after its publication on June 5, at the request of the police. A day later, Mbarki was summoned for investigation and was interrogated for four hours by officers who pressed him to reveal the source of the photo. After refusing to disclose the photo's source, Mbarki was released, and was later charged with complicity in terrorism.
- On July 16, 2015, mathematics teacher Abdelfatteh Said was arrested and charged with complicity in terrorism for alleging on Facebook that the Sousse attack was a conspiracy carried out by security forces.^[30] He was further charged with "accusing, without proof, a public agent of violating the law" under Article 128 of the penal code for sharing and commenting on a photo-shopped picture of Prime Minister Habib Essid originally posted by another user. The photo showed Essid holding a shovel along with the caption "Don't tell me that they weren't ready for the Sousse attack ... " Though the terror and defamation charges were later dropped, Said was still sentenced to one year in jail for "knowingly broadcasting false news", under Article 306 of the Tunisian Penal Code. On February 5, after spending seven months in prison he was released after a court of appeal dismissed his case.^[31]
- Police union activist Walid Zarrouk continued to face legal trouble over his Facebook publications. On October 21, he was sentenced to three months in jail after he was convicted of defaming the Tunis deputy public prosecutor.^[32] He was released on 15 December.^[33] Last year, a primary court sentenced Zarrouk in absentia to one year in jail for "insulting others through public communication networks" over a 2013 Facebook post.^[34] In the post, he accused the then-general prosecutor of the Tunis Tribunal, Tarek Chkioua, and Minister of Justice Nouredine Bhiri of "politicizing prosecutions".^[35]
- In December 2015, 17-year old high school student Afraa Ben Azza was charged with insulting police officers in her Facebook posts under article 125 of the Penal Code. Ben Azza was arrested on December 16 while she was protesting against the planned destruction of a historic monument in El Kef, northwestern Tunisia.^[36] She spent a day in police custody. On January 29, a children's judge dismissed her case.^[37]
- On February 23, a court sentenced in absentia Slim Riahi, founder and leader of the Free Patriotic Union, a liberal political party currently serving in the coalition government, to six months in jail for defamation. Riahi was sentenced following a complaint filed by Taher Ben Hassine, a politician and owner of an opposition TV station at the time of Ben Ali, over a 2014 Facebook post. In the post, Riahi accused Ben Hassine of being an informant to the Ben Ali regime.^[38]
- Following its publication of the "Panama Papers" leaks surrounding the global offshore accounts, the online media outlet *Inkyfada* faced threats of legal prosecutions for writing about local politicians mentioned in the leaks. Politician Mohsen Marzouk, who is the former secretary general of the governing Nidaa Tounes party, threatened to sue *Inkyfada* for defamation after revealing that he sent emails to the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca inquiring how to launch an offshore business.^[39] Marzouk later abandoned his plans to sue the site.^[40] Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist Ennahda party, a member in the governing coalition, also threatened legal action against *Inkyfada* for mentioning him "without justification" in a report about the company owning Tunisian News Network (TNN), a privately owned news channel with close ties to Ennahdha. In the report, *Inkyfada* did not imply Ghannouchi's name appears in the Panama Papers, but only mentioned his links to TNN.^[41] To this date, however, *Inkyfada* was not the subject of any legal investigations or prosecutions.
- On December 5, police arrested six young male students on "sodomy" charges.^[42] The six were sentenced to three years in jail under article 230 of the Penal Code which bans homosexual acts. One of the students was sentenced to another six-month jail term under article 226 for "indecent behavior" over pornographic videos the police found on his computer. On January 7, a court ordered their release

for "procedural irregularity" after police raided an apartment of one of the accused with a written warrant.^[43] Nearly two months later, a court of appeal confirmed the "sodomy" conviction but reduced the students' sentences to one month in jail each.^[44]

Authorities have also arrested several individuals for advocating extremism. Early in June 2015, the interior ministry announced the arrest of three individuals running a Twitter account in support of Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, a terrorist group active on the border with Algeria.^[45] A month later, eight users were arrested for inciting to terrorism on social media sites.^[46] There were no reports that these arrests contravened international norms on free speech.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Surveillance remains a strong concern in Tunisia due to the country's history of abuse under the Ben Ali regime. While there have not been any reports of extralegal government surveillance in the post-Ben Ali period, the deep-packet inspection (DPI) technology once employed to monitor the internet and intercept communications is still in place, sparking worries that the technology can be reactivated if desired.

The creation of a new government surveillance agency in November 2013 raised concerns among human rights and privacy groups, particularly given the lack of transparency surrounding its duties. The Technical Telecommunications Agency (ATT) was established by decree n°2013-4506 under the former administration of Ali Laarayedh. The decree tasks the ATT with "providing technical support to judicial investigations into information and communication crimes," but neither defines nor specifies these crimes.^[47] Netizens immediately criticized the decision for its lack of parliamentary scrutiny, as well as a failure to provide the body with a clear and limited mandate, with independence from government interference, and with mechanisms to guarantee user rights.^[48] According to Article 5 of the decree, the ATT's activities are not open to public scrutiny.

The ICT minister is charged with appointing the ATT's general director and department directors. An oversight committee was established "to ensure the proper functioning of the national systems for controlling telecommunications traffic in the framework of the protection of personal data and civil liberties." The committee mainly consists of government representatives appointed from the ministries of ICT, human rights and transitional justice, interior, national defense, and justice.

Despite this early criticism, the ATT started operating in "full capacity" in the summer of 2014^[49] after the appointment of Jamel Zenkri, who previously served at the ATI and the INT, as general-director.^[50] Responsibilities for conducting internet surveillance for the purposes of law enforcement have thus been transferred to the ATT from the ATI, which often assisted the judiciary in investigating cybercrime cases despite the absence of a law requiring it to do so.

Fears over the ATT have been boosted by the fact that Tunisia' legislators have been slow to initiate any legal reforms that would protect citizens from mass surveillance.^[51] Draft amendments by Tunisia's Data Protection Authority (INPDP) to amend the country's 2004 privacy law have not been discussed by the constituent assembly or by the new parliament elected in October 2014.

Laws that limit encryption also remain a concern in the post-Ben Ali era. In particular, Articles 9 and 87 of the 2001 Telecommunication Code ban the use of encryption and provide a sanction of up to five years in prison for the unauthorized use of such techniques. While there have been no reports of these laws being enforced, their continuing existence underscores the precarious nature of Tunisia's newfound and relatively open internet environment.

Police often seize users' electronic devices or access their online accounts in the course of investigations related to other crimes. For example, police officers pressed 40-year old entrepreneur Ahmed Redissi to provide access to his social media accounts during an investigation into his religious practices on December 7, 2015.^[52]

Intimidation and violence

In addition to legal prosecution, users must also be wary of extralegal attempts to silence them. On September 30, 2015 police assaulted two journalists of the collective blog Nawaat.org while they were covering a protest against a controversial "Reconciliation Law" that would provide some immunity to public officials charged with corruption for acts committed under the previous regime.^[53] One of the journalists, Ali Mensali, was detained and released the same day after police made sure he deleted footage showing them beating protesters.^[54]

Technical attacks

Since Ben Ali's fall, there have been no reported incidents of cyberattacks perpetrated by the government to silence ICT users. However, other groups and individuals have employed these methods to intimidate activists and organizations with whom they disagree, particularly during major political events such as the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections. After it published its first Panama Papers report mentioning politician Mohsen Marzouk, *Inkyfada* came under a cyberattack that forced the site to go offline for a few days. Hackers sought to manipulate the site's content, and they managed to publish an article falsely alleging that former president Mohsen Marzouki received 36 million dollars from a Qatari foundation through an offshore company based in Panama.^[55]

Notes:

¹ "Percentage of individuals using the Internet, fixed (wired) Internet subscriptions, fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions," International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2009 & 2014, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

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⁶ Decision of July 29, 2013 on the conditions for the exploitation of public internet centers: <http://bit.ly/1PkBfqg>.

⁷ Instance National des Télécommunications, "Suivi des principaux indicateurs du marché de l'Internet en Tunisie" [Monitoring of main indicators regarding the Internet market in Tunisia], March 2016, accessed February 23, 2016, http://www.intt.tn/upload/files/TB3_Data%20-%20Mars%202016.pdf.

⁸ "Didon cable linking Italy and Tunisia enters service," *Telecom Paper*, September 22, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1L9DFV2>.

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