

# URGENT ACTION

## POLITICIANS UNJUSTLY HELD FOR OVER A YEAR

Opposition politicians Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj, and Abdelhamid Jelassi have been arbitrarily detained since February 2023 on unfounded “conspiracy against state security” accusations. In January 2024, a judge rejected the latest appeals against the prolonged pre-trial detention of the six detainees submitted by the Committee for the Defense of Political Detainees. Tunisia’s anti-terrorism court is investigating all of them for trying to “change the nature of the state” under Article 72 of the Penal Code which carries the death penalty. We call on the Tunisian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them and drop the charges against them as the charges stem from the peaceful exercise of their human rights.

### TAKE ACTION:

- Write a letter in your own words or using the sample below as a guide to one or both government officials listed. You can also email, fax, call or Tweet them.
- [Click here](#) to let us know the actions you took on *Third Urgent Action 52.23*. It’s important to report because we share the total number with the officials we are trying to persuade and the people we are trying to help.

#### President of the Republic Kais Saied

Route de la Goulette,  
Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie  
Email: [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)  
Twitter: [@TnPresidency](https://twitter.com/TnPresidency)

#### Tunisian Ambassador to the United States Her Excellency Mrs. Hanene Tajouri Bessassi

1515 Massachusetts Avenue,  
NW, Washington DC 20005  
Email: [AT.Washington@Tunisianembassy.org](mailto:AT.Washington@Tunisianembassy.org)

Your Excellency,

I am gravely concerned over the prolonged arbitrary detention of opposition figures, **Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj, and Abdelhamid Jelassi** on unfounded “conspiracy” accusations. Over a year after their arrests, authorities have failed to release them from arbitrary detention.

Since their arrest in February 2023, none of the detainees have been questioned in relation to acts that would amount to recognizable crimes under international law, so the charges against them are unfounded. They were questioned about their relationship with each other and with foreign diplomats, on meetings they undertook together, and on their messages about the political situation in Tunisia.

Political activists **Chaima Issa** and **Lazhar Akremi**, released in July 2023, who spent months arbitrarily detained in the same case were banned from travelling and “appearing in public spaces”.

I therefore urge you to immediately release Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj, and Abdelhamid Jelassi from arbitrary detention. I also urge you to ensure that the restrictions against Chaima Issa and Lazhar Akremi are immediately lifted, and all the charges against them dropped, as the charges stem solely from the peaceful exercise of their human rights. Pending the release of the detained individuals, ensure that they have access to adequate healthcare. Moreover, I call on you to cease your targeted arrests of critics for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Yours sincerely,

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Since February 2023, Tunisian authorities have opened criminal investigations against at least 50 people on unfounded conspiracy accusations. Amnesty International has documented the cases of eight in relation to this investigation including politician, **Khayyam Turki**, arrested on February 11; dissident and politician, **Abdelhamid Jelassi**, arrested on February 12; opposition activist, **Issam Chebbi**, arrested on February 22; opposition activist, **Jaouhar Ben Mbarek**, arrested on February 24; and lawyers, **Ghazi Chaouachi** and **Ridha Belhaj**, arrested on February 25. Prominent opposition figure, **Chaima Issa**, arrested on February 22 and dissident, **Lazhar Akremi**, arrested on February 13 were released on July 13, 2023, after nearly five months of arbitrary detention.

On February 12, 2024, the six detainees began a hunger strike to protest their arbitrary detention. Two of them had to stop for health reasons while Khayyam Turki, Abdelhamid Jelassi, Issam Chebbi, and Jaouhar Ben Mbarek continued their hunger strike until February 27. According to human rights lawyer and member of the Defense Committee of Political Detainees, Ayachi Hammami, the health situation of the detainees has [deteriorated](#).

All eight of the defendants are being investigated in relation to trumped up charges of conspiracy under 10 provisions of the Tunisian Penal Code including Article 72, which mandates the death penalty for trying to "change the nature of the state." They also face several charges under 17 articles of the 2015 counterterrorism law including Article 32, which mandates up to 20 years of imprisonment for "forming a terrorist organization". The judge and the Tunis Court of Appeals initially rebuffed requests by lawyers to release the eight suspects from pre-trial detention. However, in July, the court released Chaima Issa and Lazhar Akremi and banned them from travelling abroad and "appearing in public spaces." The Court extended pretrial detention for the remaining six, citing the need to "ensure the sound course of the investigation".

Since the investigation [started](#) in February 2023, judicial authorities have summoned at least 42 additional political activists, members of the opposition, businessmen, former members of parliament, lawyers, human rights defenders and former security officials for investigation in the same case.

On July 25, 2021, President Saied [claimed](#) emergency powers that he said were granted to him by Tunisia's 2014 constitution. Since his power grab, President Saied has dissolved Tunisia's parliament, issued [decree-laws](#) that threaten human rights including the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, overseen the drafting of a new [constitution](#), and sought to strengthen his [influence](#) over the judiciary. On June 1, 2022, President Saied arbitrarily fired 57 judges whom he accused of conduct including failure to investigate terrorism-related cases, adultery, and holding alcohol-fueled parties. The Justice Ministry has refused a ruling by Tunisia's Administrative Tribunal to [reinstate](#) 49 of them.

**PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET:** Arabic, French, English, or your own language.

**PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL:** May 6, 2024.

**NAME AND PRONOUN:** Chaima Issa (She/Her), Lazhar Akremi, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj and Abdelhamid Jelassi (He/Him).

**LINK TO PREVIOUS UA:** <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/7273/2023/en/>