



## The President of Tunisia Slanders the Jews

by Dr. Edy Cohen

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The president of Tunisia, disturbed by demonstrations against his country's economic mismanagement, pulled out the one card that has always worked for Arab presidents and kings who need to divert attention away from their own failures: blame the Jews.

Ten years after the so-called "Arab Spring" began in Tunisia, that country is in the headlines once again. A series of violent demonstrations have taken place there against a backdrop of economic hardship. Tunisian president Kais Saied, troubled by the demonstrations, employed the traditional means of gathering support and deflecting complaint away from himself: he blamed Israel and the Jews.

That is what Saddam Hussein did during the 1991 Gulf War, when he fired 39 missiles at Israel following the US-led international campaign to dislodge him from Kuwait. Many other Arab leaders, both before and after Saddam, have used the same tactic. Hostility against Israel or the Jews routinely serves as a unifying factor and a convenient means of deflection.

And now we have President Saied, who stated on a recent visit to a Tunis suburb that the Jews are nothing but thieves. "We know very well who the people are who are controlling the country today," he said to a crowd in a speech that was captured on video. "It is the Jews who are doing the stealing, and we need to put an end to it." The accusation of theft is a well-known antisemitic slur that has been used against the Jews for centuries.

The Committee of European Rabbis [condemned Saied's words](#) and is holding him accountable for anything that might happen to the Jews in his country: "The Tunisian government is the guarantor of the safety of Tunisian Jews. President Kais Saied's remarks threaten the integrity and security of one of the

world's oldest Jewish communities." Likewise, Dr. Miriam Gaz-Abigail, Chairman of the Central Organization for Jews from Arab countries and Iran (an umbrella organization that includes Jewish organizations from a variety of communities from the Arab world), posted a condemnation on the organization's Facebook page.

Video of Saied's speech circulated quickly in the Tunisian media. Many are saying the slur about Jews was a mere slip of the tongue, though the word "Jews" can clearly be heard in the video. Government officials are claiming that Saied did not say "Jews" but rather a similar-sounding word in Arabic.

Saied's office issued a statement on the matter that contained several parts:

1. A total denial that the president had defamed any religion
2. A claim that the president draws a distinction between the Jewish religion and Zionism
3. A reminder that Saied had recently visited a Tunisian synagogue (where he offended his hosts by refusing to wear a skullcap, though this was not mentioned)
4. A claim that the whole story was a conspiracy against the Tunisian people
5. A verse from the Qur'an

Tunisia is unique in that it contains thousands of Jews and hardly any of them have been harmed. Three Jewish ministers have served in the government, including Rene Trabelsi, who served as minister of tourism in the administration that preceded that of Saied.

That is not to say that the Tunisian people are uniformly fond of the Jews. Saied was elected two years ago on campaign promises that he would maintain no ties with Israel, that normalization with Israel constitutes treason, and that he would bar Israelis from visiting the country.

With that said, Saied has not issued any criticism of the four Arab states that signed peace agreements with Israel in recent months.

*Dr. Edy Cohen, a researcher at the BESA Center, specializes in inter-Arab relations, the Arab-Israeli conflict, terrorism, Jewish communities in the Arab world. He is the author of The Holocaust in the Eyes of Mahmoud Abbas and The Mufti and the Jews: The Involvement of Haj Amin Al-Husseini in the Holocaust and His War Against the Jews of the Arab Lands 1946-1935.*