

TUNISIA

Tunisia's Trabelsi family

Last Updated: Monday, January 31, 2011 | 3:32 PM ET

By Jon Hembrey, [CBC News](#)[Back to accessibility links](#)**Beginning of Story Content**

Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon says Belhassen Trabelsi, the brother-in-law of Tunisia's former dictator, has a legal right to apply for refugee status. (CBC) More than two weeks have passed since the ouster of Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and now some of the anger that fueled the month-long demonstrations is focused on members of his extended family who allegedly fled with millions of dollars worth of the country's wealth.

Here in Canada this includes the Trabelsi clan, the family of Ben Ali's second wife Leila, many of whom occupied key positions of power within Tunisia before the uprising.

The outrage of Montreal's large Tunisian community is being directed largely at Belhassen Trabelsi, billionaire businessman and eldest brother of Leila Ben Ali, who has been accused of stealing a vast amount of wealth from Tunisia. Trabelsi, who arrived in Canada on a private jet with his wife, four children and nanny on Jan. 20, is the subject of a Tunisian arrest warrant but his fate remains unclear.

On Jan. 29, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon said Trabelsi, who recently had his Canadian permanent residency status revoked, made a formal refugee claim. Some have noted that this could take years to work through the courts.

The Canadian government has stated he is not welcome, but Cannon said Trabelsi has a right to apply as a refugee under the law and the country would follow the proper process.

To receive asylum, Trabelsi would need to prove that he faces persecution in Tunisia.

The family is not new to controversy on the world stage. Ben Ali's family, which includes the Trabelsi clan, was criticized in the recent U.S. diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks.



Tunisia issued an international arrest warrant for ousted president Zine EL Abidine Ben Ali and is also seeking the arrest of his wife Leila, both shown in this 2007 photo. (Hassene Dridi/AP) The cable said "Leila Ben Ali, and her extended family — the Trabelsis — provoke the greatest ire from Tunisians."

According to a BBC article, the two families owned a huge share of the country's wealth. "Our Tunisian lawyer friends tell us that the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families controlled between 30% and 40% of the Tunisian economy," Daniel Lebeque, head of the French branch of Transparency International, [told the BBC](#).

Lebeque estimated their assets to be worth \$10 billion US, including significant chunks of the country's banking, transportation, tourism and property industries.

So far, 33 members of both families have been arrested. Tunisian authorities have asked for the arrest of six others, including Belhassen Trabelsi.

Family assets

A former hairdresser, Leila Trabelsi began placing her 10 siblings in key positions of power throughout the country following her marriage to Ben Ali in 1992.



A man carries goods from the house of Belhassen Trabelsi, the brother of the former president's wife Leila Ben Ali, on Jan. 15, 2011. The home in Sokra, Tunisia, was looted after the president stepped down. (Hassene Dridi/AP) The leaked cable

describes Belhassen Trabelsi as "the most notorious family member," and describes his holdings as "extensive," including an airline, several hotels, one of Tunisia's two private radio stations, car assembly plants and a real estate development company.

On Jan. 27, Mouldi Sakri, Tunisia's ambassador to Canada, said he had asked Canadian authorities to freeze the assets of the members of the Ben Ali family and their allies.

The government would need to see proof that assets were acquired illegally for them to be frozen, said a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs. "Our government is prepared to work with the UN or the government of Tunisia to apply such a freeze," the spokesperson said. "We will use all tools at our disposal to address this situation, in cooperation with the international community."

On Jan. 31, the foreign ministers from European Union countries announced they were going to accede to the Tunisian request to freeze the assets of Ben Ali and his wife. This could be extended to others who are accused of misappropriating state funds, an [EU official told Reuters](#).

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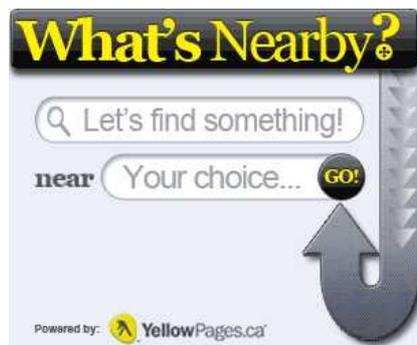
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