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2003

## How Arabs Fight Islamism: A Letter from Tunis

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### Recommended Citation

Marshall J. Breger, How Arabs Fight Islamism: A Letter from Tunis, 73 NAT'L INT. 117 (2003).

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*Letter from Tunis*

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# How Arabs Fight Islamism

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Marshall J. Breger

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**I**F THERE IS one foreign leader whose views were validated by the painful events of September 11, 2001, it is Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.<sup>1</sup> For years he has conducted a no-holds-barred battle against Islamism in Tunisia. And unlike in Algeria, Tunisia's neighbor to the east, Ben Ali has largely won.

One price of the extirpation of Islamic militants in Tunisia prior to September 11 has been an incessant barrage of foreign (often French) press criticism for various human rights violations. Watchdog NGOs like Human Rights Watch piled it on as well. While he kept up the heat at home, Ben Ali often found that Islamist exile leaders had been given a pass, finding comfortable perches in London or Frankfurt. Ben Ali chided Western countries as early as 1994 for "serving as rear bases for fundamentalist terrorists", pointing to *laissez faire* attitudes toward the political activities (and worse) of Islamic exiles in London, Frankfurt and Paris.

September 11 swiftly softened the public criticism. French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine was dispatched to Tunis soon after September 11 to express solidarity with Tunisia's efforts. Shortly

thereafter, French President Jacques Chirac visited to praise Ben Ali's long-term struggle against terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, underscoring that Tunisia's position of "refusing religious intolerance and fundamentalism is completely exemplary." In November 2001, the French magazine *L'Express* repented its targeting of human rights violations in Tunisia, pointing out that "democracy is not built in a single day."<sup>2</sup> In the United States, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns spoke of Tunisia's "record of moderation and tolerance in the region."

The Tunisian approach to combating terrorism has taken three forms. First, the country has refused to cede ground on Islamic theology to fundamentalist clerics. Second, since 1990 the country has conducted a "war" against Islamic fundamentalism, an approach that America only began after September 11. When it comes to the security aspects of fighting Islamic fundamentalism, the Tunisians, to borrow an Algerian term, are *éradicateurs*. Third,

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<sup>1</sup>Ben Ali came to power in 1987 in a bloodless coup known as "The Change." It was directed against the government of Habib Bourguiba, the leader who had achieved Tunisia's independence in 1956 but who had grown increasingly erratic in his later years.

<sup>2</sup>"*Ben Ali contre Bin Laden*", *L'Express*, November 8, 2001.

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Tunisia has understood that economic development is vital to the task of drying the pools of fundamentalist support in the country. And it has remembered a vital corollary as well: for the sake of social stability, attention must be paid to the social well-being of those temporarily left behind by economic rationalization.

### *Cooperation of Church and State*

TUNISIA SEES itself as a state of Muslims, but not an Islamic state.<sup>3</sup> At the same time Tunisia offers its own vision of Islam—one based on strict limits on the public role of religion and a strong focus on tolerance as part of Islam itself. While the constitution describes the country as a predominantly Muslim nation, this empirical fact of demography does not lead to the conclusion that Tunisia is an Islamic state.

True, Tunisia does not follow a Western model of strict separation of church and state. Habib Bourguiba, the country's first president, dropped state support for Islamic seminaries and institutions. After his ascension to power in 1987, Ben Ali tempered this course somewhat, giving more prominence to the rituals of faith. Thus, the call to prayer could once again be heard on state-run radio and television. Furthermore, while in Tunis some years ago during the Prophet's birthday, I discovered that the entire cabinet was expected to join President Ben Ali at Zeitouna, the country's main mosque.

Tunisia's divergence from a model of strict secularity is designed to promote a form of Islam consistent with tolerance and respect for religious difference. Jalloul Jerabi, Minister of Religious Affairs and former head of the Tunis Zeitouna University (its religious university), has suggested that the traditional rule requiring the reconquest of *dar al-Islam* (lands of Islam) lost to the *dar al-*

*harb* (lands of darkness) is no longer applicable. This rule, he told me over lunch in a Tunis Kosher restaurant, was applicable in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Islam was a struggling religion, but not today, when it is a growing religion of over one billion adherents. Zeitouna, in the words of its President Muhammad Toumi, stresses the Quran's "125 verses that insist on religious freedom and that ask Muslims to respect others." Thus, Tunisia rejects the view of Islam as a religion that ineluctably captures all of a society's social and political space, a principle further reflected in its ban on Islamic parties.

Because graduates of Zeitouna staff the state's Islamic institutions, the faithful of Tunisia hear a very different message at Friday prayers than their co-religionists in Egypt, Saudi Arabia or East Jerusalem. So do secondary school students in religious classes taught by Zeitouna graduates. As Mohammad Charfi (himself a critic of Ben Ali) has underscored,

Religious matters, programs and textbooks emphasize the thinking of the scholars influenced by the best of our late-medieval thinkers, like Averroes and Avicenna. Such writers have developed new readings of the Quran and given Islam a content that allows for discussion of sexual equality, human rights, and the development of democracy.

These subjects, as well as modern science, are all taught as part of—not in contrast to—the values of an enlightened Islam.

This past November, Ben Ali announced creation of an "International Prize for Islamic Studies" in order to

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<sup>3</sup>Tunisia is a country rich with political heritage.

While nominally under Ottoman suzerainty in 1861, it produced the Arab world's first written constitution. This document followed on the 1857 *abd al-aman* (Charter of Faith), which provided legal protections to the country's non-Muslims.

enrich interpretive (*ijtihad*) thinking that believes in dialogue and openness and rejects exclusion and fanaticism. This focus on Islamic values of tolerance may be not only Tunisia's most important weapon against Islamic fundamentalism, but also its greatest contribution to a Western counter-terrorism policy designed to win "hearts and minds."

Further evidence of Tunisia's efforts to influence Islam include its actions overriding *sharia* law in the matter of the status of women. When Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956, the new republic's first major social reform was the Code of Personal Status, banning polygamy and establishing basic equality. Most recently, a 1998 presidential decree created a national fund to protect the rights of divorced women whose husbands refuse to pay alimony. Women are fully integrated into the workforce and compose 52 percent of students enrolled in university. In terms of women's rights, Tunisia is a rare phenomenon in the Arab world.

### *Les Eradicateurs*

THE REJECTION of Islamic fundamentalism is total. President Ben Ali first reached out to the Islamists directly after coming to power in 1987, but after Rachid Ghannouchi's Al-Nahda (Renaissance) Islamist party turned to terrorism—placing bombs in tourist hotels in the late 1980s, attacking the ruling party office in the Tunis suburb of Bab Souika in the early 1990s and conspiring during that time in an Islamist coup—Ben Ali cracked down. Since then, Tunisia has been unwavering in its approach toward Islamists, outlawing its institutions and jailing its followers (such as they are).

In the late 1990s, many foreign analysts felt that the Al-Nahda threat had been stanchied. Indeed, some, like Professor John Entalis of Fordham, have

called Al-Nahda a "mainstream group" (together with the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and in Egypt!) and labeled its exiled leader Rachid Ghannouchi "a moderate voice." This is the same Ghannouchi who signed a 2002 call "to end any discourse with Israel" and described Operation Iraqi Freedom as "a war against Islam", arguing that "struggling against this war is a compulsory duty for every Muslim."

Still, Tunisia did not wait until September 11 to strike hard against Islamic terrorism. Between 600 and 1,000 Islamists are currently imprisoned for extended terms. The Tunisian state has used military courts to give prison terms to 34 Tunisians found guilty of recruiting for Al-Qaeda. In November 2002, Muhammad Saidani received a twenty-year jail sentence for leading an Islamist cell in Italy. Not surprisingly, Amnesty International has complained about the use of military courts to levy these and other harsh penalties.

Recent years have witnessed an increasing concern over joint activity between Al-Nahda and the secular Left. A London satellite television station that broadcasts to Tunisia provided these strange bedfellows airtime to attack the regime. And for a time, Al-Nahda and Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes (MDS) representatives (one of the seven legal opposition parties) joined to create a "demonstrative front" against Ben Ali.

The April 11, 2002 bombing deaths of 21 people at the El-Gribba synagogue in Djerba makes clear that the danger of Islamism in Tunisia has not dissipated. At first, the government claimed the explosion, caused by a gas truck driving directly into the synagogue, was an accident. But after a reality check, the Ben Ali government moved with great dispatch. German investigators (many of the dead were German tourists) were invited to cooperate. Further, Ben Ali moved to shake up his anti-terror apparatus, removing from office

both the interior minister and Djerba's police chief. The Tunisians will not brook failure in the fight against terrorism.

### *Economic Growth*

**I**N CONTRAST to most Arab states, you cannot visit the cities of Tunisia (big cities at least) and not be aware of its economic progress. New skyscrapers, bustling stores and privately-owned automobiles abound. Objective statistics also tell the tale. GDP growth reached 4.3 percent in 2002 and is forecast at 5.89 percent in 2004 (world recession and tourist drought notwithstanding). Inflation has stabilized at under 3 percent. Only 4.2 percent of the population falls below the poverty line (the number was almost one third in the 1960s). Tunisia's per capita GDP already equals that of Eastern European countries like Bulgaria or Romania.

The World Economic Forum recently named Tunisia the most competitive country in Africa. The Global Corruption Report for 2001 found Tunisia to be not only the least corrupt nation in North Africa (a dubious distinction, to be sure) but also the third least corrupt state in Africa as a whole. Foreign investment, around \$400 million in 1997, topped off at \$1 billion in 2000 before falling back to \$700 million in 2001.

Nor has human development been ignored in favor of GDP growth: 91 percent of the minor population is literate, and the rate of population growth has been held to 1.15 percent. (Contrast this number with Syria at 2.5 percent, Jordan at 2.9 percent and Morocco at 1.68 percent.) Over 80 percent of the population own their own homes. The life expectancy of 72.4 years is the highest in Africa. All citizens have government health insurance. About 6 percent of Tunisian GDP is allotted to education, 99 percent of children eligible for primary school attend and 75 percent of secondary school age

children are enrolled. Notwithstanding its Francophone past, English is compulsory in schools after age 13, and computer training is offered in most schools.

Still, the economic challenges are significant. Unemployment hovers around 15 percent and will stay so for the next three years. The tourist boom has collapsed, and the anemic world economy has increased pressures on the export economy. In particular, the textile sector, which comprised over 40 percent of the export economy in past years, has drastically suffered.

In 1998, Tunisia began to implement the Euro-Tunisian Association Agreement that was designed to drop all customs duties between Tunisia and the EU by 2010. Specifically, Tunisia is committed to a structural adjustment program, the so-called *mise à niveau*. This will require it to meet EU manufacturing and service industry quality standards and improve both the quality and competitiveness of Tunisian manufacturers. The EU agreement demands painful introspection by the Tunisian business and manufacturing community. One commentator has suggested that "the portion of industrial production threatened by the removal of import controls from the EU has been estimated at 60 percent."<sup>4</sup> Still, Tunisia

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<sup>4</sup>Phase 1 of the EU agreement from 1996–2001 allowed Tunisia to subsidize the restructuring process of manufacturing firms. This "loop-hole", the period of which can be extended by prior agreement between the two countries, fits Tunisia's *dirigiste* history, particularly its concern for social stability. Thus, the government has acted to contain the damage of bankruptcy (using a law that asserts that the survival of firms takes priority over debt repayment) and the unemployment that might ensue. While the government has continued the privatization process (26 firms were slated for sale in 2002), it has done so cautiously, resisting IMF pressure to speed up economic liberalization due to its continued sensitivity to the perceived danger of social unrest.

leads the pack of EU Mediterranean “partners” in meeting its structural adjustment benchmarks, notwithstanding the pressures such economic rationalization places on the economy.

Tunisia’s concern for social stability makes it acutely sensitive to the costs (and often real pain) of the “structural readjustment” so often required by economic modernization. A good example is the National Solidarity Fund. The 2626 Fund, as it is informally called, was created in 1992 to involve all members of society in the fight against poverty. The fund consists of voluntary (although strongly encouraged) contributions and a government stipend. The fund makes grants for infrastructure and employment projects in impoverished, usually rural areas. The success of the 2626 program led the UN to set up a World Solidarity Fund based on the Tunisian model.

Concern over structural unemployment led to the creation of the Solidarity Bank in 1997. Designed to promote entrepreneurship, the bank makes loans of up to 33,000 dirhams (with a specified grace period and subsidized interest rates) to those with a university diploma (US\$1 = D1.2825). It focuses on unemployed and underemployed university graduates, such as waiters with doctorates who might indulge in social unrest. The bank was funded by over 232,000 shareholders who paid in D18.5 million. The state added D11.5 million to bring bank capitalization to D30 million. From March 1998 to May 2001, the bank funded some 42,000 projects that generated almost 60,000 jobs. Thus, the Bank serves the twin purposes of reducing the costs of the EU economic rationalization campaign and lessening its potential to cause political instability.

Tunisia has also focused on supporting entrepreneurship among the “working poor.” Following the model of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, in October 1999 the Solidarity Bank introduced a

micro-credit program to assist entrepreneurs in rural development areas. The program makes loans of D1,000 at 5 percent interest with a repayment period of three years. By 2001, almost 9,000 such loans had been made. Only four loans had fully defaulted.

To further encourage entrepreneurship, Ben Ali recently announced a program to grant leaves of absence to civil service employees and managers who wish to start their own business in the country’s less-developed regions. During these one year (renewable) leaves, the government will pay half their salaries. The hope, of course, is that this “safety net” will encourage entrepreneurs to go out on their own.

### *A Long March Toward Democracy?*

THE conventional wisdom is that Tunisians have been offered a Faustian bargain, whereby they thrive economically but abandon politics to the political class. This simplistic trade-off is unfair to the vast majority of Tunisians, who have not chosen lucre over liberty. Rather, the photos of fundamentalist carnage in next door Algeria have sensitized them to the threat of violent anarchy and the need to guard against it. They may not embrace the restrictions, but they accept them.

Tunisia is first and foremost a homogeneous society with little ethnic division (contrasted to the Berbers in Algeria and Morocco). It has a long tradition of relatively centralized, personal authority—be it by the Bey of Tunis or the French Resident-General. Further, it is a society with a high premium on stability and consensus, as its relatively bloodless independence reflects. And so it is that the ruling party, the Rassemblement Constitutionnelle Démocratique (RCD), possesses the vast portion of the nation’s political energy. It has 2 million members and 7,800 branches nationwide and won 91.59 percent of the

vote in the October 1999 elections. One-party state or not, the RCD would likely win a fully fair and free election if held today. The seven legal opposition parties are anemic at best. If democracy is to take hold, it may be that the ruling authorities will have to force-feed the opposition.

Ben Ali has in fact done just that (confident that, for the foreseeable future at least, the opposition lacks both bark and bite). In July 2001, he announced an initiative to enlarge the pool of those eligible to run against him in the next presidential elections. And while the opposition holds 34 of the 182 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, these are all seats given to the opposition on a proportional basis, and it holds those seats only because Ben Ali passed a law that ensured the opposition parties at least 20 percent of the seats, no matter how few votes they actually received. The same is true for municipal councils. In Ben Ali's view, these actions "consecrate political pluralism."

These developments reflect Ben Ali's view that "the development of democracy is very much a matter of education and of progressing step by step." He fears that in societies without historical democratic roots, opening the floodgates of political discourse can easily lead to extremism and instability. While he encourages opposition, it is responsible or "loyal" opposition. The "hard" Left and Islamic perspectives are banned outright. Ben Ali views the legal opposition as part of the national consensus and meets with their leaders regularly to promote national unity. Nevertheless, the political space the legal opposition covets is securely held by the RCD.

The recent round of constitutional reforms adds considerably to the country's formal democratic structure. It creates a second parliamentary chamber, gives new prerogatives to the elected Constitutional Council and installs a two-round presidential electoral process in cases where no

candidate wins an absolute majority in the first round (as in the French system). It also requires periodic oral questioning of elected officials (as in the British parliament). In Tunisia, where the government has an overwhelming parliamentary majority, this becomes one of the few ways available to foster government accountability.

But these significant structural reforms have been overshadowed by the controversy surrounding the constitution's revised term limit provisions. Ben Ali would have bumped up against the three-term limit when his term ran out in 2004, but the very thought of succession-planning was a non-starter for the ruling party. (Indeed, many Tunisians may well have been frightened by the thought.) Thus, it came as no surprise when Ben Ali proposed a constitutional amendment abolishing such term limits. After further changes by parliament, the proposal raised the maximum age of presidential candidates to 75, thus allowing Ben Ali, at 74, to run for a fifth term in 2009. (In the resulting constitutional referendum, 99.52 percent of the electorate ratified the changes.) Ben Ali's popularity notwithstanding, the symbolism of the term limit waiver is undeniable. Thus, for Tunisian political institutions, the challenge of succession has been postponed but not resolved.

Political scientists have begun to realize that elections alone are not a sufficient definition of democracy. Democracy assumes a competitive electoral arena with multiple strong political parties. Opposition parties cannot be created *ex nihilo*; instead they must reflect the variety of political, geographical and class interests of the population. Tunisian elections do not yet include, in Joseph Schumpeter's words, "a competitive struggle for the people's vote." While Tunisia possesses the grammar of pluralist democracy, its oversized ruling party crowds out not only political competition but other elements of civil society. The problem of

how the party relates to the state and the state to the party is one of the most significant challenges facing Tunisia. It has been avoided rather than addressed.

### *The Challenge of Human Rights*

**J**UST AS THE war on terrorism raises human rights issues, so does Tunisia's war on Islamic fundamentalism. The government has arrested hundreds of suspected Islamists, passed laws making it a crime to incite religious fanaticism and clamped down harshly on any suggestion of an association with Al-Nahda. At times this zeal has spilled over to members of outlawed secular groups like the Parti Communiste Ouvrier Tunisien (PCOT). It ought, therefore, to be no surprise that Tunisia is heavily criticized by human rights organizations for a variety of misdeeds—ranging from prison conditions to political prosecutions for defaming the government to refusal to allow political activists exit visas. These charges should not be minimized, though they are often overstated by NGOs. They certainly pale in comparison to the level of human rights violations by its neighbors to its east and west—let alone by the “axis of evil” states.

The government's response to these criticisms is to point to the concrete threat of fundamentalism. Sadok Chaabone, a former justice minister, has argued, “When we started, we had 1,000 people in the prisons. . . . But it's better than 100,000 dead, like in Algeria.” At the same time, the government has embraced the normative grammar of human rights. It has restructured cabinet portfolios to raise the profile of human rights concerns through a Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (now held by Bechir Takkari). Indeed, Tunisia even has its own human rights league (the Arab world's first): the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de L'Homme (LTDH), which it continually pressures but steadfastly recognizes. In a recent Republic Day speech, the

President affirmed “the supremacy of the law”, underscoring that “the foundations of the republican system include the protection of the right to differ.”

At the same time, senior magistrate Mokhtar Yahyaoui—who was suspended without pay in July 2001 when he complained about the “total lack of independence” in government—was restored to office. A torture victim, Ali Mansouri won a court case against government officials and received \$210,000 in compensation. In May 2001, President Ben Ali pardoned Nejb Hosni, a legendary Tunisian lawyer and civil rights advocate. In January 2002, Mohammed Mouda, head of the opposition socialists, was conditionally released after a hunger strike and is back at the helm of MDS. Hamma Hammani, the leader of the barred PCOT, who was jailed after coming out of hiding last February, was recently released on health grounds. And in August 2002, former Prime Minister Muhammad Mzali returned from 15 years in exile to praise Tunisia's economic and social stability within the context of a movement toward democratic pluralism.

There is no doubt that the government would prefer to control the human rights debate. It tried to “stack” the membership of LTDH (presumably to influence its policies), and it has refused official recognition to a second, competing human rights group: the Civil Liberties League, which leaves its membership open to prosecution. Indeed, its efforts to ward off criticism have led to a unique and humorous moment in human rights advocacy: the battle of competing human rights websites. After a series of critical reports by Amnesty International, a pro-government website went online with the confusing address of [www.amnesty-tunisia.org](http://www.amnesty-tunisia.org). Amnesty cried foul, charging that the government was creating a deceptive website. Tunisian officials claimed ignorance of the entire affair. The faux website was eventually moved to



www.rights-tunisia.org and is not currently operational. The bad blood between the government and the international human rights community has colored perceptions on all sides. And even when the government is responsive to human rights complaints, as when it set up a commission of inquiry on jail conditions, it gets little credit.

The big civil liberties issue up for grabs, however, is freedom of expression and freedom of the press in particular. State officials seem to take personal offense to attacks in the press and react harshly when criticized. Tunisia has found itself afoul of press freedom groups worldwide. To the government, this is largely the result of a vendetta by the left-wing French press, especially *Le Monde* and *L'Express*. Many in the government, however, have begun to appreciate the foolishness of barring foreign media who air negative news stories when more and more homes have satellite dishes. Besides Al-Jazeera in Dubai, Al Musta Killah, a London based cable network, has specific Tunisian-focused programming. Its weekly no-holds-barred talk show, *Le Grand Maghreb*, offers discussion with dissidents of various stripes.

In April 2001, the Tunisian parliament revised the country's press code, eliminating the charge of "defaming public order" and removing the possibility of prison sentences for falsely presenting advertising material as news items and other selected code violations. The period of suspension was shortened from six to three months. And in May 2001, the president spoke out on press freedom, calling on journalists to "write on any subject you choose. There are no taboos except what is prohibited by law and press ethics." The following year, however, Zouhair Yahyaoui, publisher of a webzine, was jailed for two years. His crime: "putting out false news." Another journalist, Hedi Yahmed, was similarly charged when he published a critical

report on the country's prisons. His case has not yet been adjudicated.

**T**UNISIA REMAINS a North Africa success story. One can point to its economic growth, political stability, integration of women into the workforce, successful war on terrorism and support for a moderate Islam as elements of that success. Still, its challenges in the coming decade are great. First is the continuing challenge of social stability, which it is far better positioned than its neighbors to achieve. Second is continued economic development, including the ultimate challenge of free trade with the EU. Here, too, Tunisia is progressing past its Maghreb neighbors and looks likely to meet its EU target of full free trade by 2010. Third is the continuing challenge of Islamic fundamentalism that is often propelled by regional developments.

Finally, there is the challenge of democracy and human rights. Ben Ali has staked his country's survival on a philosophy of gradualism, one in which economic and social stability provides the basis for what one of his closest advisors has called "the road to pluralism" and respect for law. Gradualists are inherently open to the criticism of not moving fast enough. If the language of democracy is not fortified by pluralistic politics, the hopes for a democratic *civitas* can easily atrophy. Further, there is a real danger that the very restrictions on democracy and freedoms designed to ensure stability can themselves create instability. By choosing a top-down, drawn out process of democratization, Tunisia may well find itself riding the proverbial tiger, forced to choose more authoritarian solutions to ensure stability because the democratic aspirations of the moderate center are being too slowly fulfilled. To paraphrase former Solicitor-General Archibald Cox: Once loosed, the idea of liberty is not easily cabined. □