

# Is Tunisia Tipping?

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From July 2007 to June 2010, I was the Senior Defense Official and Defense Attaché in Tunisia. For those 3 years, I daily had the opportunity to routinely interact with and get to know and understand the Tunisian government, its military, and most importantly, its people. For those who have lived in the country, the fact of the “Jasmine Revolution” is less of a surprise than the timing. To understand why, alone among Arab nations, Tunisia was able to overthrow a dictatorial regime through a popular uprising, it is necessary to understand what makes Tunisia a unique nation in the Greater Middle East.

Unlike many nations in North Africa and the Middle East, Tunisia did not undergo an extremely oppressive or difficult colonial period. At an historical crossroads, the Tunisian people and culture are the result of a mix of cultures and ethnicities. By its nature, Tunisian society is extremely tolerant, while at the same time proud of its culture and heritage. If you were to ask the average Tunisian how they identify themselves, the most likely answer would be “Tunisian,” followed perhaps by “Mediterranean.” The Tunisian middle and upper classes identify more with Europe than with Africa or even the Arab Middle East. This is in large part due to their first president, Habib Bourguiba. One of the first pronouncements he made as president (Tunisia gained independence in 1956) was that Tunisia was not going to reject France, but would maintain close relations and build on the good things that Tunisia’s relationship with France provided (like infrastructure, Western ideas and practices, medicine, a relationship with Europe, etc.). Already a moderate and tolerant society, Bourguiba, seeing himself as the Arab Atatürk, declared Tunisia a secular state, outlawed polygamy (Tunisia is the only Arab Muslim state to do so to this day!), declared equal rights for women, mandated mandatory education for boys and girls to age 16, etc. It is necessary to mention these reforms because they directly affect any analysis of the current Jasmine Revolution, what it might lead to, and what it may mean for the region.

Tunisians are, by their national personality, a generally patient and tolerant society. In the main, Tunisians do not care if a person is a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew. In fact, there is an active, thriving Jewish population in Tunisia who do not see themselves as Jews in Tunisia but as Tunisian Jews. Their neighbors see them the same way, and the Jewish community is active in all aspects of society. Historically, the government has provided a good standard of living for the Tunisian population, and all education, through university, is state funded. Literacy is 74%-76%. Tunisia has its own medical schools and trains doctors and pharmacists from throughout Africa and the Middle East. It has a large, robust middle class-80% of Tunisians live in privately owned homes, and the per capita income is about \$8,000-among the highest in the region.

Tunisia's military is small and extremely professional. As the Defense Attaché, I was struck by the fact that every Tunisian officer I knew was focused on maintenance and training-not on personal aggrandizement or monetary gain. This attitude went right to the very top.

Since its independence, Tunisians have enjoyed greater opportunities for growth and development than the citizens and subjects of other states in the region. Even Ben Ali, for most of his presidency, put the welfare of the country and its people first-building up the education system, promulgating social welfare programs, protecting women's rights, building infrastructure, and cracking down on Islamic radicalism. However, all of this came at a price. There was always an unspoken understanding between the people and the government-the government provided for a certain standard of living and economic opportunity in exchange for political freedom. The situation began to decline after Ben Ali divorced his first wife and wed his second (much younger) wife, Leila Trabelsi. Though the president, and by extension his family, have always received significant economic advantages, the practice was kept low key, and most agreed that if the president and his inner circle were getting theirs, as long as it was subtle and the standard of living and government programs continued to benefit society, no one begrudged them their perks. Over the years that attitude changed. The Trabelsis became the closest thing Tunisia has to a crime family, and Leila took full advantage of her position. Corruption began to increase at the hands of the Trabelsis and Ben Ali families, and they became ostentatious-something that rankled Tunisian sensibilities. At the same, the economy began to decline and unemployment rose. Add to this a growing youth population that is well educated, technologically savvy, modernized, and worldly, and you have almost a perfect storm.

It is necessary to comment on the youth of Tunisia and caution against making generalizations that are too sweeping. While the reforms and programs of Bourguiba were near revolutionary for the late 50s, for the Tunisian youth of today, theirs is the only life and society they have known. Tunisia is a modern, well-connected country-there are more internet access connections in Tunisia than in any country in Africa-and that is with a population of only 10.5 million. Although the government monitored and blocked internet sites (a practice that was resented, often protested, and generally circumvented by Tunisia's computer literate youth) Tunisians also have unfettered access to satellite television and news programs, to include Al Jazeera, are extremely popular.

I have seen several comments in the press noting that Tunisia's population is 98% Muslim and that combining poverty, unemployment, and a youthful population creates an environment that can encourage fundamentalist Islamic fervor. This may be true, but the following is enlightening. When I arrived in Tunisia in the summer of 2007, I was told that Tunisian society was becoming much more fundamentalist and, as evidence of this, I was told that as late as 2002 you never saw women wearing headscarves in public, but now the practice was growing. It was true, I saw women in headscarves in public, and so I began to discuss this with Tunisians at every opportunity, especially the women. I asked them why the practice was growing. Note, this was not some sort of rigidly conducted scientific survey - I was only able to speak

to people who spoke French or English and, of course, I could only discuss the subject with those willing to speak with me. But what I learned was both fascinating and a caution about making assumptions and sweeping generalizations of Tunisian society. Some indeed began wearing the headscarves out of a great connection with their religion-many during or after Ramadan when they spent the month fasting, reading the Koran, and reconnecting with their religion. Some, especially teenagers and young women, were making a fashion statement, coordinating their head coverings with their French blouses and tight jeans - a fashion fusion of Western and North African styles. I was told that some women had their fun when they were younger, clubbing and partying, but now were looking to settle down and get married, believing that eligible men were more attracted to traditional-looking women for wives. Women of my age and generation were like those in the United States who, after a certain age, begin going back to church regularly - the children are out of the house, they are beginning to have grandchildren, they realize that they are closer to the end of their own life than the beginning, and they become more conservative in their lifestyle. However, the answer I found most interesting was the one that the women in their mid-20s to 30s told me: "I wear a head scarf because Ben Ali doesn't like it. Every time I put it on it is like I'm poking him in the chest." This was not a religious expression, but a political one. Because under the Ben Ali regime, the people did not have a political voice (which was more of an issue for the youth than their parents' generation and the issue did not rise to the surface until corruption became ostentatious, and the economy went into decline), these women were substituting the language of the mosque for political language. Was I seeing the rise of Islamicism in a secular and moderate society as a surrogate for political discourse? Such concern, while legitimate and realistic, has to be tempered by the fact that there is still a very strong, secular middle class in Tunisia (to which most of the youth activists belong) and that these young women, and the rest of the youth, are still products of their society and environment. These young women did not correlate the wearing of traditional head coverings as a surrender of their status in society. They were born into a society where full equal rights and opportunities for women are the norm, and they take that status for granted-they have never known anything else.

So, what does this all mean? First, the Jasmine Revolution has been coming for a long time. I witnessed firsthand the fascination with which the Tunisian people watched the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The U.S. Embassy hosted an open reception on election night to watch the returns. Embassy personnel expected as many as 400 Tunisians to attend, however, we had over 1,000 and as the crowd grew, it became younger. When the final results were in, young Tunisians came up to me to thank me for the opportunity and to exclaim how wonderful America is. Many said, "We know how the process works. George Bush the father was president, his Supreme Court made his son the president, and they chose his successor. But the American people said no, we want Barack Hussein Obama, and the government had to do what they said. Why can't we do that?" At that point, I knew Ben Ali's days were numbered. After the election, Tunisians on the streets, in coffee houses, and everywhere commented that the American way was best and that Tunisia needed to choose new presidents every few years to have fresh ideas and to keep them honest.

Tunisians are tolerant and patient, but the society has matured to the point where the population is ready for full political enfranchisement. All that was needed was a spark to start the movement. Protests against corruption and unemployment have been growing in the past few years but have happened far from the capital, such as the one I witnessed in Gafsa. However, the latest protests quickly spread to the capital and the frustration and anger of the injustice of the system was spread through social networking media; the genie was out of the bottle. The most telling thing about this protest is that the real nature of Tunisian society came to the forefront. Even though a significant percentage of the population took to the streets, the death toll was relatively low because the police and security forces were reluctant to kill their own people (imagine what would happen in Syria, Libya, or Sudan?).

Most telling, as the protests and riots grew, the military refused to act against its own citizens. It is important to note that a significant percentage of the Tunisian military officer corps was trained in the U.S. under the Individual Military Education and Training program. This U.S.-funded program not only provides its students with military skills and training, one of its major objectives is to expose its participants to, and inculcate in them, American and professional military values. Aside from the United States, Tunisia's officer corps trained in France, Germany, Italy, Greece, and other NATO countries. It is widely reported that Ben Ali ordered the army to put down the protests, and MG Ammar, Chief of Staff of the Army and the highest ranking general in Tunisia, refused. This is not only a testament to the values and professionalism of Ammar, but a commentary on his understanding of what his professional, secular, Western-trained and value-oriented military, would and would not do.

Right now the Tunisian people are riding a high, and I expect public protests to continue for a while, though the violence will abate. This is the first opportunity they have had to express themselves and their initial success is heady stuff, but I do not think that things will get worse or that anarchy will reign. I am told by contacts in Tunisia that those who reject the Jasmine Revolution, notably the corrupt members of the Presidential Guard, are being rounded up and arrested with the help of the public, though it is notable that they are not being murdered or lynched. Soon after Ben Ali departed the country, a car with four men armed with guns (believed to be members of the Presidential Guard) and shooting at crowds and buildings were surrounded by citizens who managed to disarm them and then held them for the police. It bears repeating, Tunisians on the whole are moderate, tolerant, and respect the law. Once they get this revolt out of their system, they will get to work. Though there will be false starts and difficulties ahead, I expect to see a more pluralistic, more representative government, and greater economic opportunity and growth. My greatest fear is that groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) will take advantage of the situation to execute terror attacks in Tunisia. As a secular, moderate society, Tunisia is on AQIM's radar. The first major terror attack after 9/11 took place in Tunisia (in Jerba). As corrupt and repressive as Ben Ali's internal security forces were, they kept the country secure from terrorist activities (which is sadly true of most totalitarian societies). With few natural resources, Tunisia's economy is a service-based economy built in large measure on tourism. Tunisians are not ignorant,

and I suspect that the civil disorder will abate in time for Tunisia to once again be attractive to tourists from Europe and (both interesting and telling) Israel. However, a series of terrorist attacks can derail the country's progress. I know the military is well aware of this and is no doubt acting accordingly.

Is this the possible next wave in the evolution of Arab society? It is certainly reverberating among a certain segment in the Arab world, but it is unlikely to result in the successful overthrow of the most despotic regimes in the region any more than the 1979 Iranian Revolution spawned Islamic revolutions. Like Tunisia, Iran had (and has) a unique culture and history. Tunisia is unique<sup>3</sup> in its temperament, in its society, in its culture, even in the attitudes of its government and military. I suspect that the governments and security services of other countries in the region, to include their militaries, would show little or no reluctance to savagely put down similar demonstrations. In fact, while the Jasmine Revolution will certainly have some Arab activists and groups considering how they could bring about a similar revolt in their countries, the leaders of those countries are already maneuvering to bolster regime security<sup>3</sup> internal security forces are energized. It should also be noted that the polities of most Arab nations have not had the advantages that Tunisian society enjoyed for the past 54 years and have not reached the point where a popular, nation-wide demonstration could likely be sustained in the face of an unflinching government response. Rather than a flash in the pan, I think the Tunisian situation should be viewed as a seed. How it grows will determine how influential it is in the region of the coming years.

Now that the Tunisian people have spoken, in which direction will the country tip? The Tunisians themselves will make that determination; however, the Jasmine Revolution provides a great opportunity to further U.S. national interests in the region. The U.S. has an opportunity to assist as a midwife to the birth of a truly democratic Tunisia, and for true democracy to thrive; a growing prosperous middle class is a necessity. Tunisians, as a society, are educated, modern, energetic, and ripe for the opportunity to take full control of their lives. During my tenure in Tunisia, nearly every Tunisian business person that I met told me they wanted to learn and use American business models. With few exceptions, Tunisians saw learning the English language as the key to success in business. While corruption was rampant under the Ben Ali regime, and "the Family" managed to insinuate itself into most successful business enterprises, many Tunisian entrepreneurs were convinced they could avoid such unwanted advances if only they had an American business partner. Already moderate, tolerant, and Western-oriented with a strong sense of self identity, Tunisia is on the cusp of becoming a fully realized democratic society. The necessary infrastructure exists; the drive and the desire exist; the capabilities and talent exists. The process can be smooth or it can be difficult, and it is in the interest of the Tunisians, the United States, and ultimately the region for America to offer its hand and provide whatever support is necessary as the Tunisian people take charge of their lives and their nation.

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