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## BOURGUIBISM AND THE TUNISIAN POSITION

A Letter from Charles F. Gallagher

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PHILLIPS TALBOT  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Every Thursday morning, at a variable hour somewhere between 10 and 11, the President of the Tunisian Republic, Habib Bourguiba, who is also Prime Minister, speaks informally to the press from his ornate, heavily-carpeted office in the Presidential (ex-Beylical) Palace in the heart of Tunis. Every Thursday evening the President's recorded voice reaches out across the country by radio in a sometimes longish fireside chat, during which he explains, expounds and excoriates, discussing everything from women's rights and the need for removing the veil to the war in Algeria or the philosophical groundwork of the Tunisian state.

During the rest of the week the President, who believes firmly in the value of information and propaganda as aids to his policies, freely dispenses interviews to members of the international press and to visiting dignitaries; confers regularly, as President of the Council, with his ministers, now called "Secretaries of State"; collaborates on the final wording of the somewhat delayed constitution and sets a fast pace for a young, vibrant, and unorthodox administration, which, more than anything else, recalls the enthusiastic early days of the New Deal to American visitors.

This similarity to the American reform regime of 25 years ago is far from coincidental. Tunisia, more than any other state in the Arab world, has deliberately taken on many of the trappings and the nomenclature of the American presidential system, just as countries like Japan in the

19th century felt compelled to invent a peerage and establish a parliamentary democracy under constitutional monarchy in admiration of then predominant British institutions. For it was in 1934 that Habib Bourguiba took over leadership of the Tunisian independence movement and founded the neo-Destour Party, and as a young lawyer he was profoundly impressed by Franklin Roosevelt's redrawing of the social and economic map of the United States.

Bourguiba gives you the impression, when you see him, of a latter-day Roosevelt. Intense, dynamic, and possessing great personal charm and warmth, he has an air which never lets you relax from the moment he takes you by the arm as you enter his study and guides you to a low, leather chair; his conversation is rapid and staccato, punctuated by gestures of earnestness and impatience, and reinforced by a series of almost Barrymorean expressions of sunshine and storm. He thinks of himself, and is, a molder of men's minds -- for it is in this capacity of a leader trying to teach his people to think issues out that he has made his most original contributions to present-day North African politics. Called by his detractors a "drawing-room revolutionary," he had the sense to see a generation ago that in a long struggle with the French verbal eloquence and rhetorical tactic were as important as boycotts and guerrilla warfare.

He is also like Roosevelt, and Nehru, and one whole range of statesmen, in favoring the dramatic political issues of the world often at the expense of the humdrum problems of daily life. "If you want him to make a decision in economic policy," one of his close advisors said to me, "you have to outline it clearly and concisely, explain it without hesitation and press for a statement then and there. If you don't settle it then, he will turn to other things and put it on the shelf." And, as might be expected of this kind of leader, personal affection and trust play a large part in his official life. Bourguiba is the Tunisian government

CHARLES F. GALLAGHER has since 1951 been a student of the affairs of Northwest Africa. He started his higher education at the University of California just after Pearl Harbor and soon was shifted to the Japanese language school at Boulder, Colo. He served out the war as an officer in the Navy and then became fine arts advisor on Japanese cultural property during the occupation of Japan. In 1949 he entered Harvard University to major in Far Eastern languages and history. He was graduated *summa cum laude* in 1951. Subsequently he was twice offered Harvard-Yenching fellowships to continue in the Far Eastern field, but decided instead to study Islamic society. Under Fulbright and Ford fellowships, he worked for two years in Paris and three years in North Africa. After completing his research in Rabat, he settled in Tangier to write a history of Morocco and a grammar of Maghrebian Arabic. He joined the AUFS in July 1956 as a staff member and participated in the 1956-57 program of visits to member institutions. In the summer of 1957 he returned to North Africa under AUFS auspices.

and the men in office around him are close friends, veterans of twenty years of joint struggles, whose complete loyalty is taken for granted. This is one reason why the defection of Salah ben Youssef last year was so violently taken; to Bourguiba it was not only treason against the Tunisian fatherland, it was a personal betrayal by a trusted lieutenant which was almost incomprehensible to him.

Along with having put the imprint of his personality upon Tunisian internal affairs, Bourguiba has provided Tunisian foreign policy with an approach to international problems which has earned a name among foreign diplomats: Bourguibism. What is "Bourguibism" and what are the principles it represents?

In Bourguiba's own words, his policy is to "advance by negotiation, agreeing on fixed stages, carrying out all agreements made, and using them as stepping stones to future progress." This remark is best understood in the light of Bourguiba's policies in the struggle for independence, policies which he has recently been urging upon Algerian nationalists, many of whom have preferred more direct action involving a jump over intermediate goals to the final objective. (Quite recently his surprisingly successful effort to hold the Algerians back from the edges of an "independence-or-nothing" attitude, has been an excellent example of reverse brinkmanship.) The history of the past five or six years in Tunisia, with successive stages of cabinet government, internal autonomy (1955), independence "with interdependence" (March, 1956), and now true independence, also illustrate the process. In American terms, Bourguibist theory is like the tactics of a football team which never tries for the quick breakaway, but consistently makes three yards on every play; it may not look impressive as it grinds forward, but it gets results.

Another explicit principle of Bourguibism is, "Always negotiate with your adversary of today with the expectation that he will be your friend of tomorrow." This policy has been consistently followed, although it has almost snapped at several points, with France. Even at times of blackest relations with France, Bourguiba has always known that co-operation between the two countries would again someday be essential; and he reproaches both the French and the Algerians on this score now. His pressure on the French to evacuate their garrisons, relinquish control of airdromes, and give up frontier surveillance, has been constant and unremitting (and successful), but it has almost never been so abrupt as to cause an out-and-out rupture. Such dramatic measures as the declaration of martial law in the western governorates bordering on Algeria, and the recall of the Tunisian Ambassador to France, were quickly tempered, when it seemed they had gone a shade too far, by philosophically judicious statements in the next week's radio talk, and a full break has never come. Yet Bourguiba has certainly played the card of support for Algerian nationalism much more audaciously, and from a legalistic viewpoint has behaved much more irregularly, than has Morocco. And, in spite of intermittently serious tension with France, he has

gotten away with it. He has even managed the doubly difficult task of sheltering Algerian nationalists in Tunis, which has become the political headquarters of the FLN (National Liberation Front) in the past year, without endangering either the security of his own country or upsetting the some 200,000 Europeans who live here in perfect tranquillity.

Present relations with Egypt provide another example of treating today's adversary as tomorrow's possible partner. Although it is an overstatement to consider Egypt an "adversary" of Tunisia, relations between the two countries are quite cool. But one would never suspect this from official declarations of the President, nor from the expressions of gratitude evoked by the shipment of a few thousand Egyptian rifles last week, nor from the delegations that come and go between the two countries. Public opinion has to be taken into account to a certain extent -- although Tunisian public opinion is relatively subtle and Bourguiba has great faith in its ability to grasp the reality of events beneath the surface -- but, it seems that Bourguiba is unwilling, in spite of often sharp attacks on him in the Egyptian press and open complaints by Egyptian diplomats here over Tunisian policy, to dismiss the possibility of a future rapprochement with Cairo, either as part of his repeated desire to make of Tunisia a hyphen between East and West, or should it ever become necessary, in the interests of Arab solidarity or for any other reason, to alter the course he has set. The President is not one to burn his bridges behind him.

At present the Tunisian hyphen is rather one-sided. The government has definitely chosen the West, or, to put it in other terms, has chosen what it considers to be the camp of freedom. Bourguiba himself explains this on the basis of historico-geographical necessity in part, but emphasizes also the question of principle involved. In fact, it would be well to remember that Tunisia is more attached to certain principles -- liberty, dignity, economic well-being, not necessarily in that order -- which it feels can best be attained by co-operating with the West, than to the West as an abstract idea. The Occident, like a rich woman, is perhaps more susceptible of being loved for her attractive way of life and the glamor that surrounds her, than for any intrinsic moral virtue. The camp of liberty is also the camp of the higher standard of living and that makes it all the more desirable. But if the West fails Tunisia, as a few Tunisians fear it is beginning to do (see CFG-10-'57 "Thoughts from Tunis"), a made-to-order psychological excuse is ready to explain subsequent disillusion and defection.

An example of this was provided recently in a conversation I had with a bright, young, and quite "pro-American" aide of the President. When I suggested some of the grimmer political possibilities of the present economic doldrums, he sighed resignedly and said: "Yes, but if we finally did leave the West, it would be your fault. It would mean that we had been unable to co-operate with you as we wanted to, and that we would be better

off on the other side. You, the West, would lose, and people like me and the rest of the regime would lose, but empirically the mass of the people would be better off." In other words, the "people" are neutral; they are waiting for their leaders to take steps to improve their standard of living and increase their self-respect. Bourguiba and his government have told them that this can best be done by remaining firmly attached to Western principles and working with the West. It is now up to the leaders to prove it.

This wait-and-see attitude of the average Tunisian is still tempered by an open friendliness toward everything Western, which is partly the basic temperament of an easy-going people, less disposed to violent reactions than are the inhabitants of most Arab countries, and is partly communicated to them through their government and their faith in it. The unfeigned delight of village schoolboys in talking to an American, for example, can only be the result of what they and their parents have heard at home on the radio or what they have been taught at school. And there is a touching belief in the imminence of solutions. Conversing at random throughout the country, you meet this sort of statement. "Yes, I am unemployed. There is no work to be had, but Bourguiba will do something; he is very clever. And I am sure you will help, too."

It might be unfair to claim that the Bourguiba government has set a course for Tunisia which involves turning its back on the Arab Middle East, but it is not too much to say that it has left only a crack open in the door. The proof lies not only in numerous ministerial statements to the effect that Tunisia has "another way of thinking," or that the Arab countries in the East are living in a dream-world, but in the routine orientation it is giving to its foreign relations. Apart from its adherence to the ill-fated Eisenhower Doctrine, about which the less said the better, the keystone lies in indifference to the Arab League. Tunisia is where the Arab League stops geographically, and Bourguiba's statement last year that he would rather join NATO than the Arab League has not been forgotten in the Middle East. The whole question of Israel and the almost total amalgamation of Tunisian Jews within the society here is another point. (The refusal of the delegations of some Arab countries to compete against a Tunisian Jewish wrestler in the recent pan-Arab games in Beirut was taken as a serious offense here.)

Illuminating, too, are the visa requirements for foreign nationals entering Tunisia: those who need no visa are citizens of France, United States, Western Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Cuba, Denmark, Great Britain, Holland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden. Not one other Arab country is on the list. In the same way, all traffic from Tunis heads for Europe -- go north, young man, is the order of the day. Three or four planes a day fly between Tunisia and France, but there is only one weekly service to Cairo. Figaro, Le Monde, Combat, and the Paris papers

of the day are hawked on the streets in the early evening and read widely, but try to find a representative selection of newspaper from the Middle East in the stands.

As with communications, so with language. There is not a Tunisian minister who was not educated in France and who does not possess an almost completely French culture; all of them speak perfect French but many do not speak good Arabic at all. Government communications are overwhelmingly edited in French and intergovernmental conversations are usually a hodge-podge of both tongues, but as technical content and difficulty increase, French predominates. According to one official, 60 to 70 per cent of all written communications are in French. The use of French, moreover, is not confined, as in Morocco, to a fairly restricted group; it is common to all classes and is even frequent in smaller towns and villages. Its use is not evidence of snobism but is the fruit of seventy-five years of contact and intellectual intercourse gathered by a people with high assimilative gifts and a bent for learning. The decision of the Secretary of State for Education to teach French as a living language through primary school and to make it the language of instruction in secondary schools for at least the next fifteen years (so that students can go on to higher education in Europe), is perhaps more than any of the foregoing indices, symbolic of the future that Tunisia's leaders plan for the country.

Naturally, all this brings charges of "neo-colonialism" and "incomplete independence," especially from visitors from the Arab states. Having traveled to Tunisia on the same ship with some Middle Eastern journalists coming here for the first time after having been in Morocco, I was amused at some of their reactions. To begin with, there were the usual linguistic difficulties; they are not serious but they are enough to disconcert a Middle Easterner for a bit. They never ceased to laugh when the fish they asked for as "samak" was served them as "hūt", which meant "whale" to them. In fact they could never make themselves completely understood in Tunisian restaurants because of the constant intrusion of French terms for what was, in this case, decidedly not haute cuisine. But more than that, one of them said he felt out of touch in all North Africa and particularly among Tunisians, who were, he added, "More French than the French, but they don't know it." And another admitted that if it were not for the bond of Islam, there would be little contact between the North African states and those of the Middle East; a remark I don't completely agree with, but one which does point up a fundamental reality about North Africa, with its underlying Berber strangeness and its heavy overlay of European civilization, that is too often glossed over.

The charges that Tunisia is not completely independent do not really hold water, though; they stem largely from political demagoguery. This is a country, after all, which has deprived itself of outside economic assistance from France because of its insistence on following a course of conduct with respect to

Algeria which made it impossible for a sensitive French parliament to continue financial aid. And an Algerian political leader here said the other day, "You, who have lived in Morocco, can see the difference; Tunisia is much freer, and the dynamism of Bourguiba is worth something in the end."

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The question of Tunisia's over-all orientation, however, transcends the field of diplomatic relations and enters the realm of culture. What Bourguiba is really attempting, at this hinge in Tunisian history, is a synthesis of old and new, of Islamic and Christian, or Occidental and Oriental, however it be stated, and a fusing into something which Tunisians call "Mediterranean." This is a word now very popular here, although it has not yet been defined exactly in any political or social context. Tunisians talk proudly and lengthily of their position in the center of the sea which saw the first flowering of humanistic civilization, and their eagerness to play an important role in a still vague pan-Mediterranean renaissance is unquestionable. What are the real prospects of this happening?

First of all there is the special position that Tunisia holds in the history and geography of North Africa. The most striking single fact about this country is that it faces the sea with an intensity matched only by its renunciation of the steppe-desert in its rear. Of Tunisia's population 80 per cent lives in what is called "Maritime Tunisia", the fertile, well-watered parts of the North and the Eastern coastal strip. All its important towns lie on the Mediterranean and fishing plays a larger part in the life of the country than elsewhere in North Africa. The sea it touches is a gentle one, and the land rising from it an undulating plain, broken by soft, rolling hills. This alone sets it apart from the rest of the Maghreb which either abuts on a stormy, harborless ocean to which it turns its back, like Morocco, or meets the Mediterranean in craggy slopes, as in Algeria.

Thus distinguished by geography, it was further marked by history as the gateway of civilization in the area. The small northeast corner of Tunisia has always been in the vanguard of North Africa and in most historical times Tunisia was surrounded, to the west and the east, by barbarism. Algeria and Morocco were fleetingly touched by Punic and Roman influences but from 1000 B. C. to about 1000 A. D. they lived in the outermost shadows of the world horizon; while Libya, on the east, after supporting in classical times the three ports which gave modern Tripoli its name, relapsed early in the Christian era into the desert waste it has remained ever since.

But in Tunisia, from the founding of Utica and Carthage through Roman settlement on a large scale, in the early Christian

period with St. Augustine, Donatism, and Byzantine rule, to Kairouan the first Muslim spiritual center in North Africa, and the Aghlabid and Hafsid dynasties of the Middle Ages, a high civilization, constantly renewed by outside fertilization, has been present. The one significant recession of civilization was caused by the nomadic invasions of the Hilali tribes from the east in the 12th century, largely responsible for turning southern Tunisia into a treeless wasteland -- and this memory of unwanted visitors has left a mark upon a heterogeneous people which is, unlike most of North Africa, made up of mercantile townsmen and villagers, settled small farmers and gardeners, and is nontribal in origin and attitude.

First province of the Roman Empire as Africa Proconsularis, and the only part of North Africa which has a substantial Latin population at the time, the Beylik of Tunisia had a special status under nominal Turkish rule from 1574-1705, as the result of which the Turks have always been looked upon here with respect rather than being considered oppressors; and, finally, of all the territories ruled by France it was the one which most came under the spell of Gallic intellectualism. Thus three potent influences have come at different times by sea from across the Mediterranean and left a profound mark on the Tunisian character.

If Tunisia gives the impression of having always been indifferent to "Arabism" as such, it has wholeheartedly embraced Islam and also Arabic, as the language of that religion. Many evaluations have been made by scholars as to the conflict of loyalties of Middle Eastern Arabs within the framework: nationalism -- pan-Arabism -- pan-Islamism. In Tunisia there is little doubt that nationalism, the sense of being particularly Tunisian, far outdistances the other two, and that pan-Arabism winds up a poor third, in truth hardly exists as a popular force. An intercalary force in the future might turn out to be pan-Maghrebism, the concept of North African unity, but, apart from sentimental ties to the Algerians as oppressed brothers, this is still undeveloped ground inhabited by a sophisticated minority. It may be stirring underneath, though, and one prospect for the future is that Tunisia will play a role within North Africa akin to that of Massachusetts in the early days of the American Republic as an intellectual and cultural center.

The religious aspects of Tunisia's future are uncertain, for the religious sentiments of an individual, let alone a whole people, are delicate to sound out. But, if a general statement had to be made, it would be that Tunisia is moving rapidly toward the position of a secular society. It is officially an Islamic Republic, but the government sets the tone and the government is almost as aggressively secular as the Kemalists in Turkey thirty years ago. Ever since the neo-Destour came into existence, and broke with the older fraction of the same party, in large part over religious questions, Bourguibist policy has been secular. Among the masses there is compliance with the outward norms of Islam, and among the older generation staunch belief and piety



are the rule. But among the educated and the younger generation in the towns there is apathy or outright disbelief. Young Tunisian leaders are among the very few Arabs with whom one can discuss the question of social reform, for instance, without having to go through the fiction that these reforms are being carried out in the light of a reinterpretation of the Qur'an. Discussing last year's abolition of polygamy in Tunisia, one official of the Ministry of Social Affairs said to me recently:

"The position of countries like Syria and Morocco [which have made polygamy almost impossible by interposing intricate legal obstacles without actually outlawing it] is pure hypocrisy. The Qur'an was written in response to a certain social situation existing at the beginning of Islam; that situation is not ours. How can we tell women they are the equal of men unless we make laws which insure that they shall be equal?"

To any student of Muslim theology there is much in this statement that is daring, if not heretical. Yet the government does tell women they are equal (something clearly denied in the Qur'an), has recently begun to threaten to use force to remove the veil, has abolished public habus (religious mortmain) lands, has nationalized religious educational institutions, and has completely eliminated the Canon Law with its new personal statute code -- all of which conflict with traditional religion.

So in Tunisia nationalism has been accompanied by a high degree of secularization, in contrast to Morocco, where all observers agree on the extraordinary revival of strict orthodoxy which has taken place in the past two years, especially in the countryside. It is also somewhat different from Algeria, where, although the FLN is generally considered secular in outlook, a strong reform movement has prospered for the past several decades. One noticeable phenomenon in cosmopolitan Tunis is the frequency of mixed marriages and the number of mixed (European-Tunisian) couples in public places; and it is a country where the President and his son, now Ambassador to Italy, are both married to Europeans.

It is too early to say what the continued spread of secular ideas will mean for Tunisia in its peculiar position. In the Middle East secularism has often accompanied nationalism, but it has usually been precisely these elements of the society who have become hostile to the West. In Tunisia there are grounds for thinking that its evolution may not follow a similar path. The long-range problem lies less in the weakening of religious sentiment than in knowing what constructive supports the society will erect to replace the wavering faith. All Muslim countries are facing the problem of adjusting many of their most cherished institutions and beliefs to the rigors of modernism, and one can do no more than suggest here that Tunisia seems to be beginning to do it in its own way.

All the above factors -- geographical, historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious -- will bear upon the character of Tunisia's future orientation; and, from the example of a country like Poland, one suspects they will be more potent than mere political pressure from a neighbor. In terms of culture, Westerners can do little more than has already been done in history to influence this orientation in which the West is a pole of attraction. In terms of practical international contact, the affinities which exist may make Westerners feel an obligation of conscience to co-ordinate politically or to assist economically a country which is seeking to fulfill the moral considerations we claim to want throughout the world. The new Tunisia, like the solitary traveler in the desert who seeks security from a tribal chieftain whose territory he enters, has put itself under the protection of the West. Can the gesture be refused?

*Charles F. Gallagher*