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THE EDUCATION OF TWO FUNDAMENTALISTS IN TUNISIA

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Dear Peter,

Perhaps some of my readers have noticed in the newspapers the recent arrests of some Tunisian pro-Khomeyni muslim fundamentalists in Paris and Tunis. One of my interests since arriving in Tunis has been the country's opposition movements, the so-called fundamentalists being one group among them. The arrests last week (I am writing this toward the end of March) were only the tip of the iceberg. I found this out accidentally when a couple of young students I had interviewed at the university were incommunicado for a few days, and then later reappeared to tell me their story. They said that the central Tunis police station had been filled to capacity with students. A couple of days later a government official confirmed this off-record. Before I go on with this report, however, I would like to share first of all a brief overnight "advocacy piece" I wrote for a US publication immediately following the detentions.

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The recent arrests of several pro-Khomeyni fundamentalists in Paris and Tunis focus attention once more on this tiny, staunchly pro-Western North African country. The arrests add to the speculation about the political future of a US ally that since independence in 1956 has been governed by President Habib Bourguiba and by a now decrepit one-party system, the Parti Socialiste Destourien (PSD).

Most observers in Tunisia dismiss out of hand an Iran-style revolution advocated by those who were arrested. They point out that the country adheres to the Maliki rite of Sunni islam, not to Iran's militant version of Shiism. Tunisia, they add, has a longstanding and close cultural affinity to the West. For many Tunisians furthermore Islam is at best a code of ethics.

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But several weeks of interviewing both opposition and PSD figures here reveal nevertheless that many see some continued form of radicalism in Tunisia as unavoidable. They point to the sclerotic political system that effectively denies any meaningful opposition to operate. In this climate, exacerbated by recent economic difficulties, radicalism presents an attractive alternative to many of Tunisia's students and unemployed. Many of those interviewed also profess a growing disenchantment with US policies toward the country in these turbulent times.

The arrests last week are only a small sign of a long festering problem. Those detained belong to the Mouvement de Tendance Islamique. The MTI was started in the early 1970s with the blessings of the Bourguiba regime in an effort to contain leftists at Tunisia's universities. As in Egypt the movement eventually turned against the government after becoming politicized by the country's labor strikes and political violence at the end of the decade. Since then the struggle between the MTI and the government closes the universities for several weeks every year. This year the troubles flared up about a month ago with a campaign of tire burning and nighttime arrests. A few days before the detentions the government-controlled papers printed long articles warning that force would be used if necessary to end the disputes. The arrests came, as many expected, during the spring holidays when the student body is dispersed.

The MTI's predicament is hardly unique. Despite promises of pluralism in 1980, the Bourguiba government has further tightened its grip on the political system. Multi-party elections were announced in 1981, only to be cancelled at the last moment by the president when it appeared that (an essentially loyal) opposition might be able to gain a substantial share of the vote. Some political parties have been allowed since 1983, but both their publications and leaders have been subject to a systematic campaign of intimidation or to repeated jailterms. A government-approved leadership was imposed on the country's largest union whose leaders fought the battle for independence alongside Bourguiba. Most of its 400,000 members still proclaim allegiance to the now jailed former leader Habib Achour and refuse to recognize the new leadership.

The government is aware that long-term resentment has created what one professor of Islamic theology describes as "a shark in a swimming pool." Since 1980 when a group of Libyan-trained Tunisians occupied Gafsa in the poor southern part of Tunisia, the capability of the police and actual intervention have increased dramatically. Despite his longstanding habit of keeping the army at arms' length, Mr. Bourguiba was also compelled to appoint a military man as Interior Minister after 1984. And for the first time human rights abuse charges have been levelled against the government.

In addition to opposition within the society at large, there is widespread resentment within the PSD against a relatively small number of elites who have profited from the Bourguiba era. Many analysts predict that the PSD will continue to govern the country once the president, who is now 84 and often both physically and mentally incapacitated, disappears from the Tunisian scene. It seems more likely, however, that a longlasting struggle between PSD officials and those waiting in the wings will take place. The latter outnumber the former severalfold, and many seem willing to join hands with the opposition to get ahead. They point out that the

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all-pervasive PSD is nothing more than a porkbarrel from which they only occasionally obtain small scraps.

Disillusionment with US policies is openly visible among the opposition. There is a lingering resentment after the 1985 Israeli bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis in which sixty Palestinians and Tunisians were killed. Opposition leaders often reiterate that the PLO came to Tunisia at US insistence, and they refuse to believe the US was not involved in the Israeli action. After the US bombing of Tripoli in 1986 all the opposition groups, in a rare show of solidarity, marched on the US Embassy and were promptly thrown in jail.

The strongest criticism, however, refers to internal matters. Opposition leaders say the US has adopted a wait-and-see strategy that in effect supports the Bourguiba regime. They scoff at statements made by Washington that the US has no business interfering with Tunisia's internal political affairs. After all, weren't the deliveries of increased supplies of weapons to prevent popular uprisings after Gafsa a clear sign of intervention on the government's side?

It is ironic that many of Tunisia's intellectuals and opposition leaders have been among the strongest supporters of the US. They consider it a partner against possible moves by Colonel Kaddafi to destabilize the country. They concur that the US is the only country that can help provide the economic means and expertise to get out of the current economic rut. Many would like to see a greater role for the US at the expense of France. They no longer consider the old metropole the best partner for development in the difficult economic situation of the 1980s.

As in all countries the US is constrained in Tunisia in its dealings with the opposition. And since no one expects a violent upheaval, it is easier to just wait and see. But the US could gain a large measure of goodwill and retain much credibility by nudging the regime along toward some form of accommodation. It would facilitate dealing with whatever political configuration materializes in the "apres-Bourguiba" period. And it could undercut the growing radical groups in Tunisia that now function as a spearhead for a larger disenfranchised opposition.

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I am in many ways reluctant to write anything at all about so-called fundamentalism in Tunisia - or any other country I am visiting. Although I have interviewed a substantial number of fundamentalists here, in Paris and in Egypt, I find I know relatively little about them. I have by now read many of the writings of those who have provided the intellectual and political impetus for the resurgence of islam in this century. But the whole phenomenon still escapes me to some extent.

Despite all these misgivings I wanted to write a newsletter that highlights some aspects of this islamic revival as it now takes shape in Tunisia. I think I would do ICWA a disfavor not to write at one point about a movement that has become so visible in the Middle East and North Africa. I assume that most of my readers are interested - and puzzled - by it. I must warn them, however. I think that much of what has been written about muslim fundamentalism - starting with the very word fundamentalism -

has been sensationalized.¹ This report focuses on two individuals for whom Islam is a way of life, not something to be depicted in terms that serve media interests. As myself, they are puzzled both by this depiction of the islamic revival in the popular press and by the often arcane academic debates that have become de rigueur in many western universities.

As the events of last week testify, the story of many of the more radical islamicist groups in Tunisia is undoubtedly dramatic and worth investigating. It is filled with police encounters, late night meetings, illegal distribution of leaflets and sometimes periods of incarceration and abuse. It is also a story now rather familiar to many Westerners with a modicum of interest in the Middle East and North Africa. My readers will find no flowing robes, no long beards, no shishiyas (skullcaps) in this report. The two men I have come to know very well are unlikely to demonstrate in the streets holding banners with Quranic injunctions above their heads.

They belong to a large informal movement of Tunisians equally committed to the notion of an islamic nation. Many seem to be intellectuals, and they disagree both philosophically and tactically with the younger generation. I think that it is this larger, informal movement that may in the end prove more powerful than the organized religious movements in Tunisia. They will be the ones to watch in the post-Bourguiba period. The organized groups are considered too extreme in Tunisian society. Those like Omar and Muhammad belong to an elite that make the country run. If Bourguiba's PSD disbands - as I expect it will to some extent - they may be the only group able to mediate between their more radical brethren and the discredited party elites.

Omar is a government employee, head of a ministry office. He is only fifty but already occupies one of Tunisia's top bureaucratic positions. He is fond of saying that the only promotion possible is a ministerial appointment. That he could never accept. It would mean enlisting with the PSD and be placed under the direct command of President Bourguiba. Omar loathes both the Party and the Supreme Commander.

Muhammad, his cousin, is also a government employee - to some extent. He is the imam of a mosque in Monastir. As such he gets an allowance from the state and is told what he can preach at the Friday afternoon prayer meetings. He has to walk a fine line between propagating the faith and not appearing critical of the political scene in Tunisia. This is difficult

¹ The term fundamentalism is perhaps a misnomer and is objected to by many of those I have talked to at the university. It makes one think of christian fundamentalism, something most muslim activists object to. The french have often called it "intégrisme." This also most Tunisian activists reject, since it conjures up visions of some of the militant aspects of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Iran's revolutionaries. The word currently used here is "islamism." The political movement that hopes to bring some of the precept of this movement into law is called the "Mouvement de Tendence Islamique." It is an opposition movement, and an illegal one at that.

for him. The Quran doesn't distinguish between temporal and religious authority, Mr. Bourguiba's pretensions to the contrary notwithstanding. Much of what Muhammad really wants to convey to his usual audience is off limits. He cannot attack government policies, even though he feels they are often contrary to Islamic precepts.

Both men grew up in secular homes and didn't really become immersed in Islam until they were middle-aged. Omar studied political science at Cairo University in the 1960s when secularism was prevalent. He later worked for several years at the Arab League. His conversion took place gradually. He likes to recall an event that took place shortly after he graduated from college. He had travelled to Algeria to visit his aging grandmother who lived in a small southern oasis. He found her sitting on a carpet, staring at him intently as he entered her mud house. They hadn't seen each other for years. But news travels fast across North Africa, even though families may live hundreds of miles away in different countries. After the usual introductory pleasantries she said she was happy her grandson was now a learned man. She then pushed her late husband's Quran across the carpet and asked Omar to read. He protested. He knew only a few suras (verses) and prided himself on his secularism.

Omar never saw his grandmother again. She died shortly afterward when he was stationed in Geneva on some Arab League business. But he never forgot her last sentence to him in that mud house in the Algerian dessert. Before she dismissed him abruptly she had said, with tears in her eyes, "You have learned nothing. You have turned against your family and your traditions." Omar dismissed it as sentimental drivel.

It was not until years later when he had returned to Tunisia that his grandmother's complaint came back to him. He was now a rich man with an expensive home in Medina Jedida, one of Tunis's exclusive suburbs. He gradually became outraged at the excesses and pretensions of the Bourguiba government. As a fast rising bureaucrat he understood the limitations put upon anyone who did not belong to the PSD. An outspoken man by nature, he felt limited by the ritualistic deference to whatever the Party or Bourguiba decreed.

The story of his grandmother is of course apocryphal. It is in some ways irrelevant to Omar's subsequent reconversion to Islam. Except that amidst the alienation he experienced as an intellectual, the link to the past and to tradition provided some form of recognition in a society he considered adrift. As many muslims he encountered a personal crisis and tried to solve it. As an intellectual he only felt revulsion at what some of the more radical muslims were doing. He enrolled instead at the Zaytuna mosque and obtained his doctorate in Islamic Theology. With the help of Muhammad he returned to the mosque but quickly withdrew. "What I heard there I could read in the newspaper any day," he says, "It was not Islam, it was Bourguiba's Islam."

Muhammad's reconversion came in Saudi Arabia. Born into a secular Monastir family, he became a successful anesthesiologist at one of the local hospitals. The promise of a substantial salary took him to Taif where he spent two years. As in Omar's case his rededication to Islam came slowly, almost haltingly. By the time he left Saudi Arabia he had

nevertheless performed the haji (the pilgrimage to Mecca that is one of the five pillars of the religion). He had never been interested in Tunisian politics. But he increasingly felt uncomfortable with the Bourguiba regime. Part of his unease is personal: "Here I am, a professional with a good income, and I can't even say out loud what I think of my own country's leadership."

Another aspect of Muhammad's disenchantment is social and religious. That he is from Monastir has a certain meaning here. Monastir is President Bourguiba's hometown. As such it has been blessed with an extraordinary amount of money - money that Muhammad and most Tunisians (even those in official circles I talked to) contend has been foolishly spent. A whole part of the city has been razed to make room for one of the Supreme Commander's palaces, an extraordinarily lavish complex of buildings. The most talked about extravaganza however, is a metro system that links Sousse to Monastir, an edifice constructed as a gigantic symbol of local porkbarrel politics. There is also the Bourguiba memorial mosque and sepulchre!!

All of this rankles Muhammad, for whom what he calls the "Bourguiba cult" smacks of being against some of Islam's precepts. Although the religion has no injunctions against individuals amassing wealth, there is a strong sense of social justice: one should not do so at the expense of others. This, for Muhammad, is what Bourguiba and his entourage have done. Like Omar a man with a deep sense of social responsibility, he says the antics of those in power cannot be condoned.

In the mid-1970s both men enrolled in the Society for the Preservation of the Quran. Started by the government as an antidote to the growing leftist circles at the universities, the Society soon ran afoul of its original sponsors. As in Egypt it turned against the government toward the end of the decade, shocked by the social unrest and buoyed by its own religious momentum. It reemerged as the Mouvement de Tendence Islamique and became part of Tunisia's political opposition. By that time Omar had already left the movement, convinced that opposition movements in Tunisia are stillborn. He feels the right tactic is to construct a network of intellectuals that can propose an alternative once Bourguiba dies. Nothing is possible as long as the president lives, except to organize privately. He thinks that the MTI's tactics are inappropriate and counterproductive. "By officially becoming part of the opposition [during the period when they were officially recognized] they had to play by the government's rules on opposition parties," he says. "I feel that it is crucial that any Islamic alternative start without connections to the government. Any compromise at the outset is fatal."

Muhammad will not reveal whether or not he still belongs to the MTI. He is reluctant to repeat Omar's words, but agrees that certain principles cannot be jeopardized. These are strange words coming from someone who has to compromise daily in order to keep his job at the mosque. But Omar and Muhammad see no contradiction in this. "We have an official job which feeds our families and allows us to pay our mortgages. But we have an obligation to Islam to bring about an alternative to a government that forces us to live like people without a thought in their head."

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To many of my readers the Islamic resurgence will strike them as something relatively new, perhaps dating back to the Iranian revolution. But there has always been some form of Islamic revival whenever society considered its values threatened. The more recent colonial period in North Africa produced several waves of dissent, and Tunisia was usually a generation ahead of any of the other countries in this social and cultural upheaval.

As in any crisis situation, those in power insist on their rights while the plaintiffs talk of equity and justice. The regime has conquered the mosques, has set the terms of the debate. But Jacques Berque, one of the most incisive intellectuals to ever write about North Africa, caught the desperation of those in power when he wrote about the colonial master in the interwar period: "The conquest of things only sharpens and makes desperate his compulsive longing to conquer the person opposing him." It is of course that battle that the Bourguiba government also wants to win by cajoling, by threatening and by controlling the instruments of the state. But people like Omar, with a secular education and rational mind, baffle those in power as they resist alienation by retreating into their faith. And whatever grudging reforms are offered by those in power as a sign of rationality - by implication labeling those in the opposition as resisting "the mighty weight of modern times" - only increase the sense of arbitrariness.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century this process in North Africa led to the creation of the zawiya (religious lodges), the flourishing of the marabout (wandering holy man), popular mysticism and religious brotherhoods. All of this took place in the bled, the rural areas where the government was loath to intervene. The whitewashed walls and cupolas of popular religious shrines still dominate the landscape, even though they have been relegated to popular devotion.

The historical landscape has changed. There is no more bled, even though Omar and some of his friends often talk of returning to "the country." The symbolic colonial farmhouse with its tiled roof has been replaced by a statue of Bourguiba. But the process seems in many ways the same - like France who supported in turn the great families against the marabouts, the marabouts against the reformist movements, those in power in Tunisia are fighting a rearguard action.

Friday evenings many of the men in Medina Jedida meet to celebrate the end of the week. These are usually informal gatherings at someone's home, bringing together twenty to thirty people. Most are lawyers, high government officials or successful businessmen. In social and economic terms they are the crème-de-la-crème of Tunisian society. None belongs to the PSD. Muhammad usually drives down from Monastir. There is sometimes a bit of uneasiness about his presence. One person told me very bluntly that he suspects he is a government informant. But Omar's stature within the community is such that no one seems likely to challenge Muhammad openly.

As most dinner conversations in Tunisia they always start with recent gossip - the latest news from the Carthage palace, updates on a number of corruption scandals or the whereabouts of Mr. Bourguiba's most recent female companion. Inevitably the topic of conversation turns toward

politics and the mood turns darker. (Interestingly, the few women present usually leave the scene at this point. Politics is still very much a man's business in Tunisia.) The vehemence with which the men attack the Bourguiba regime is startling. It is not the usual carping by armchair politicians, but an almost physical urge to get even.

Perhaps even more interesting is the "retraditionalization" that becomes visible at these Friday evening meetings. Men show up in traditional burnouses. "A few years ago," Muhammad says, "this was unheard of. No one who's a professional or had an advanced degree would be caught dead wearing a burnous." The big couscous meal is served around low round tables around which the men cluster, sitting on the ground.

In all of this there is an element of defiance. For years the Bourguiba government has been trying to eliminate all that it considers "backward", including fasting during the month of Ramadan. A subtle struggle between what is officially deemed acceptable and what is not has developed. The Medina Jedida men will wear their burnouses in their own neighborhood, and still preferably at night. But there are also more visible signs. I don't remember ever seeing young women wear the hijab (headgear that leaves only the face visible) on the streets. Some men now grow beards again. One must be careful - to have a beard automatically means no government job, hassles with the police. In a country where unemployment is high and political orthodoxy well enforced it can mean the difference between a job - maybe a career - or hanging around the cafés.

Both Omar and Muhammad do not carry the deep antagonism toward the West that mark many Islamist movements. On the contrary, they show great interest in its intellectual prowess and technological brilliance, particularly that of the United States. Both share the opinion that the weakness of Islam in Tunisia (and presumably elsewhere) is internally generated, fostered by leaders like Bourguiba. Islam is strong enough by itself to lead any Arab nation, and to meet the West on its own terms.²

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One of the most tantalizing questions for the two men, and for many at Medina Jedida, is what the future will bring and how long they will continue to sit on the fence. My impression is that the lingering malaise will continue for some time, punctuated by occasional signs of dissent. The government has already announced that the mosque at Medina Jedida will be closed during the upcoming month of Ramadan. No imam has stepped forward who is willing to adhere to government regulations on Friday preaching. It is during the month of Ramadan, when muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, that religious feelings often get out of hand. Even in sedate Tunisia there are usually a few incidents at cafes and restaurants that sell food and alcohol before the iftar (breakfast, i.e. first meal of

² To my more academically inclined readers, this debate on the causes of a state's weakness are by no means new. They will be reminded of the debates that took place in North Africa and the Middle East during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

the day) cannon announces sunset.

This year matters look a bit more ominous. After the recent arrests and the lingering demonstrations at the university, the government is bracing for serious disruptions. Even Omar concedes that this could be "a Ramadan like no other before in Tunisia." I expect there will be more police vans around the mosques on Fridays, and more men with dark sunglasses watching the proceedings. I also suspect they will have little effect or impact. As Omar remarks, "Islam is at the level of society; even those with the sunglasses are already scared of not joining. Even they are not taking any chances these days."

Omar's remark is born out by visits to mosques throughout the city. At Menzah V, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Tunis, the mosques on Friday can no longer contain the worshippers. I remember distinctly when years ago Friday was like any other day in those neighborhoods. But Islam at Menzah V and in Tunisia now serves a double purpose. There is of course the element that fewer people are "taking chances these days." But attendance at the Friday prayers is also a sign of enfeebled resistance to the regime. That the Menzah mosques are filled every week with people having the same social and educational background like Omar and Muhammad is a much more powerful sign of the times than the recent arrests of a few fundamentalists. The government can deny the legitimacy of fringe elements. It cannot ignore those that are part of the political regime's mainstay without undercutting its own base of support. It is precisely at that point that islamicism turns from a religious into a truly political movement.

It is hard to tell how close Tunisia is to serious upheaval. The real turning point has a psychological dimension to it - the perception of imminent change can act as its own catalyst. Beyond a certain point doctrine and scripture are irrelevant; it becomes a struggle for raw power. It is to influence this perception of change that the islamacists work so hard with their leaflets, making it appear as if their path is inevitable and close at hand. For the same reasons the government retains its grip on its own propaganda machine, making their challengers look like a small group of radical and illegitimate opponents. Meanwhile, like the bazaaris in Iran, the middle class - the thousands of Omars and Muhammads - waits to see how the powerplay shapes up. Islamicism in Tunisia is only a symbol, it is not the real battle.

All the best,



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