

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-15

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PREPARING FOR RAMADAN

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Dear Peter,

Tunisia is preparing for Ramadan. As many religions Islam adheres to a lunar calendar. The Holy Month starts when the crescent moon can be seen. For twenty-eight days muslims will fast from sunrise to sunset. In our technological age it is rather easy to determine the precise timing of sunrise and sunset. There are even some small pocket computers for sale that do nothing else. Some of Cairo's fancy stores sold them last year, covered in green plastic cases - green being the color of Islam. A traveling salesman to, say, Oman or Bahrayn can thus calculate the exact time of the beginning or end of his daily fast.

In Cairo the boom of an old cannon on top of the Citadel marks the breaking of the fast (iftar or breakfast). In Tunisia the announcement is less dramatic. People usually turn on the radio and wait until the mufti - the highest religious leader in the country - declares that iftar has arrived. I remember the first time I came to Tunisia, taking my meals at the university restaurant. Hundreds of students sat in silence with their meals in front of them. Then iftar was announced and the silent and gloomy room was transformed as if by magic into a place of laughter and excited chatter.

Of all the places I have been in the Middle East, however, nowhere is Ramadan as dramatic as in Egypt. Streets that are normally filled to capacity with people - even at nighttime - are semi-deserted in the few hours preceding the iftar. People stay at home, sleep during the day and close up shop. As soon as the cannon announces sunset people appear seemingly out of nowhere, carrying salads, yoghurt and hibiscus softdrinks. The whole city turns into a public eatery. The sidewalks are crowded with

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little knots of people enjoying a meal that is spread out on a couple of newspaper sheets. Even the floors of the fancy shops that will open up later in the evening are temporarily used as communal tables. People lounge around, usually starting their breakfast with a yoghurt-like drink that conditions the stomach after almost eighteen hours without food.

Tunis is of course much less picturesque. This is a petit bourgeois society where meals are taken in the dining room. No self-respecting family would be caught dead eating out on the street. (Cairo's extreme population density, high temperatures and lack of air conditioning in many households of course account for at least part of the phenomenon. Even in New York streetlife during the summer is much livelier in the sections above 125th Street than in the airconditioned recesses of the Upper East Side.)

For my readers who find the story about the little green computer a bit outrageous, there is an added little anecdote. Historically Ramadan has started when astrologers at the Medina mosque could see the moon crescent with the naked eye. A couple of years ago one of these learned men spotted the crescent before the officially calculated time. Although it was only a matter of a day or so, it threw a wrench into the kingdom's daily life. Shops were hurriedly closed down and the country plunged rather unexpectedly into its Ramadan.

Ramadan is on the whole a rather uncomfortable but nevertheless enjoyable time. There are the discomforts of not eating and drinking. But there also the delights of all-night visiting with relatives and friends. In Zamalek I could walk down the 26th of July street at 2 a.m. and find the whole place lit up. The sidewalks were filled with people finishing their last meal at the makeshift tables that covered the sidewalks.

But Ramadan is also a rather dangerous month. And no one is more aware of this than the governments in muslim countries. Tempers are short and brittle, brought on by the heat and the thirst and hunger. Even normally generous and docile Egyptians are on edge during Ramadan. The usual pushing and shoving at bus stations is likely to turn into an occasional fight. The month is usually also marked by more serious incidents, often flamed by muslims who object that food or alcoholic beverages are served during the day. Sometimes they are angered by the way tourists dress. Tunisia also experiences these yearly small incidents - a few shattered shopwindows, some broken chairs in restaurants or a shouting match in the medina's alleys.

It is to avoid this and more serious incidents that governments usually prepare far in advance. Adequate food supplies are stocked so that no shortages will occur that could set off riots. (In Egypt last year the only real grumble was about the absence of yamish, the nuts that go into a favorite dessert. The government decided not to import them any longer in order to save hard currency; see DJV-3.)

The Bourguiba government has also been getting ready for Ramadan - in several ways. For weeks the newspapers have printed articles assuring the population that enough food has been stocked. One would think that during a month of fasting food consumption as a whole would go down. But the very opposite is true: it increases dramatically in almost all muslim countries.

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The papers have already printed the revised television schedule for the entire month. Since people stay up very late, a number of shows are featured late at night. This year it includes fawazir, a nightly show starring Sherihane. If one would dare use such a word in these surroundings, she could be called Egypt's latest sex symbol. I remember watching her show - a relatively sophisticated affair by Egyptian television standards - almost daily last year.

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I wrote in DJV-14 about the growing sensitivity to Islamic values in Tunisia. Since I wrote the report a couple more things have happened. With Ramadan around the corner people have become even more sensitive to anything that is seemingly against Islamic ethics. A couple of weeks ago a local company put up hundreds of publicity posters of a young athletic-looking man, wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy underwear. Overnight all had been covered by strategically placed sheets of paper. On the one in my street someone had scrawled in Arabic: "This does not belong in an Islamic country." The next week the same thing happened to a movie poster on which a half-dressed starlet advertised the film version of Graham Greene's The Honorary Consul.

It seems as if the government finally caught on. This week a poster of the movie "Against All Odds" was put up. In the US the poster shows a woman with her skirt hiked up, sitting astride a young man. Here in Tunis the young man had carefully been covered in a neutral gray before the posters were glued on. The young woman was left kissing a blob of paint rather than Richard Gere.

My interest was not with the two initial posters themselves. They were by all standards done in bad taste, if not outright vulgar. Even in the United States they would have raised eyebrows. The more important issue was the incredible speed with which they had all been altered. It was clearly the work of a large group of people - and only the fundamentalists have targeted this type of western "intrusion."

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It is only fair to say that the regime is feeling very uneasy about the upcoming Ramadan. An unsubstantiated rumor predicts that the government will execute Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Mouvement de Tendance Islamique (See DJV-11). I tried to contact him as soon as I arrived here. But he was once again jailed and has not been released since. The rumor is of course unconfirmed, but its existence alone has already created anxiety among some of the fundamentalists I talked to.

To kill Ghanouchi would of course be the least intelligent thing the Bourguiba government could do. It would elevate the stature of someone who even within the Islamic movement remains a controversial figure, into a

real martyr. It would also almost certainly spell the end of the accommodation process I described in one of my previous reports. Despite all this, I wouldn't be too surprised if they executed Ghanouchi. The Bourguiba government in some ways feels increasingly beleaguered. Anyone who spends some time here can testify to an unspoken but clearly felt element of desperation.

Of those government officials I have talked to, a majority readily admitted that the government has no real policy to deal with the kind of challenge posed by the fundamentalists. The arrests of the students during the spring vacation have seemingly had little effect (see below). One official close to Bourguiba confided over lunch that the government is really divided on how to handle these types of crises. Some hardliners want a crackdown and want to see Ghanouchi hanged. Azzedine Ben Ali, the Minister of the Interior, is supposedly among them. A military man with many years of experience in internal security matters, he has emerged these last few years as an extremely powerful figure. Since there is no apparent successor to Bourguiba he could well play a crucial role as powerbroker. (It seems unlikely that the competent but unimaginative Prime Minister, Mr. Rachid Sfar, could hold the party together. And there are no other ready contenders for Bourguiba's position.) Ben Ali's political views and his growing presence may one day become a worrisome fact for Tunisia's future.

Others in the Tunisian government are willing to consider less radical measures to deal with Ghanouchi and the islamicists. It seems unlikely anything will be decided soon. Any execution of islamicists will at least have to wait until the end of Ramadan. And there are the usual signs that Bourguiba is playing off the different factions, to see which is the more powerful, before he makes the ultimate decision.

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You might remember from my previous report that some of my friends at Medina Jedida had warned that this Ramadan might be an especially difficult one. If the last twenty-four hours are any indication they may well be proven right. With the first day of the Holy Month only five days away, things have already heated up.

I was enjoying my dejeuner with a friend from the BBC at a little restaurant on Avenue de la Liberté when police sirens interrupted our conversation. Within seconds the doorway was filled with people trying to get off the street. Over their heads we could see a long line of police vans coming down the tarmac. Two minutes later the whole area had been cordoned off. Policemen with riot gear took their positions at each intersection.

I hurried back to my hotel around the corner to pick up my passport and cameras. Judging by the reaction from the hotel owner who was standing at the entrance, everyone knew what was - once again - going on. "The students," he mumbled, "it must have been serious this time."

It seems there had indeed been a large demonstration at the university. The police was obviously scared that the event would spread

around town, and prepared to isolate the Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes. The institute, although hardly a hotbed of radicalism, has been guarded by policevans for several weeks. When I returned at the gate my way was blocked by two rotund policemen with teargas guns, their belts groaning under the weight of about ten grenades each. All around were more policevans.

Just then five armed personnel carriers lumbered down the avenue, each with a couple of soldiers with submachineguns on the roof. The first two were sleek French vehicles, painted an attractive blue. (Even weapons seemingly don't escape the Gaullois flair for design.) The remainder were chunky Russian machines, spewing dark clouds of exhaust onto the gathering bystanders.

From almost out of nowhere the sidewalks were suddenly filled with people. They trooped together on balconies and peered down from rooftops. Policemen ordered everyone off the street. A couple of young motorcyclists who didn't obey quickly enough were hit by rubber truncheons. For fifteen minutes the center of the city came to a halt and the streets were empty of cars.

A few more minutes went by. Then, just as normal life was about to reassert itself, a delightful interlude took place. It invariably happens in authoritarian societies, and momentarily lends a touch of comedy to the dramatic events. A group of three more personnel carriers had become separated from the earlier convoy. Driving down the Avenue de la Liberté without police escorts they were soon engulfed by the returning regular cars. Tunis drivers - rushed even under normal circumstances - now tried to make up for lost time. They zigzagged among the carriers, blowing their horns and frustrating the young soldiers. Soon insults were traded back and forth, the regular drivers telling the army recruits in no uncertain terms where they could go with their carriers and what they could do with them! Those manning the machine guns stared into the air, seemingly oblivious to the carping around them.

The crowds, initially passive, picked up some of their compatriots' zeal. Soon everyone was clapping and jeering. For just a minute the scene looked like a Veteran's Day parade. Then the carriers reached the Avenue de France where a couple of police vans were stationed. Their appearance quickly put an end to the momentary exuberance.

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With Ramadan before us, the little incident is rather ominous. I mentioned in my previous report that certain mosques will not be open at all. The government has also announced early closing hours for those that will function normally. I have decided to stay a few weeks longer to observe matters firsthand.

At the danger of being thought frivolous I must end this newsletter with another hilarious little episode. It is so incongruous and so typical of the Beckett-like absurdities this society produces, that I cannot resist. This morning the papers were filled with a spate of articles that

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denounced in rather apocalyptic terms the "radicals at the universities who want to destroy the state created by the Supreme Combattant Habib Bourguiba, a state and a leader that enjoy the support of an overwhelming majority of Tunisians." There were also a number of pictures showing some gruesome implements supposedly confiscated by the police.

And squeezed in the middle of these pictures of deadly homemade weapons was one of a kitten with a petite annonce underneath. The classified ad said that "Minou, Siamese, with pedigree, six months old" and with "proper toilet training" was looking for a new home!! The poor thing looked decidedly unhappy surrounded by all that mayhem and those instruments of death.

All the best,

Dhandewave

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