

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-25

c/o Prof. Moncef Khaddar
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RETURNING TO TUNISIA - PART I

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

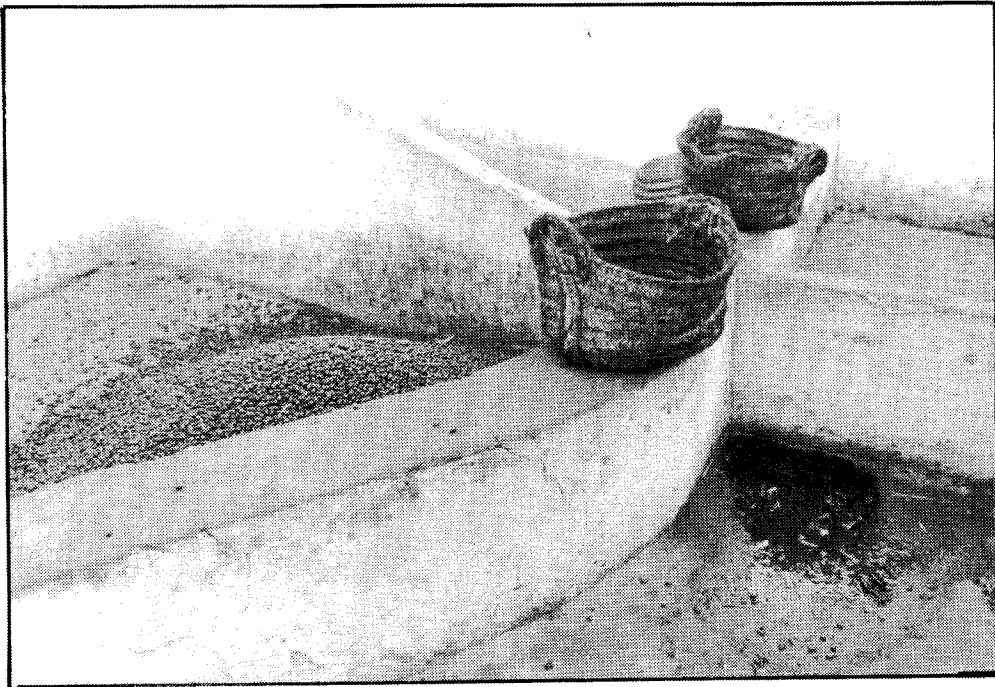
The succession of a great leader is a challenge in any country, even under the best of circumstances. If the leader was at the helm as long as was Habib Bourguiba this adds to the difficulties. If, in addition to running the country for three decades he completely dominated its political system, the task of his successor becomes not very enviable.

I have returned to Tunisia to take a closer look at the post-Bourguiba era. Perhaps it is too early to talk of anything après-Bourguiba. At one of the Parti Socialiste Destourien congresses the now deposed leader once remarked that he would continue to leave his mark on the country for centuries after his departure. The remark was vintage Bourguiba: an extravagantly hyperbolic statement that hinted at his loss of political acumen, but with an undercurrent of truth no one could deny.

The bronze statue at the Place d'Afrique still stands; the marble bust in the garden of the music academy on Rue de France has not been removed. Everywhere one travels throughout the country there is still the omnipresent Avenue Bourguiba. But the planned Cité Bourguiba and the projected new mausoleum for the Supreme Commander have been shelved without much fanfare. The unavoidable daily pictures in La Presse and the five minute reruns of his old speeches have disappeared. There are no longer arguments at the Carthage palace among those vying to hold the president's arm during his constitutional. As a matter of fact, most of those who were bickering at the time have been removed from public view altogether.

If I have been quite cynical in most of my reports from Tunisia about Mr. Bourguiba and his entourage, I must admit that his disappearance has made life here a bit more colorless. Without a dollop of gossip or a

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string of jokes that had become common currency between myself and the waiters at the Baghdad restaurant, my evening meals have turned into lusterless affairs. My usual inquiries about recent events are now met by a shouldershrugging "Tout va bien", the kind of apathy that can send even seasoned academics and journalists up the wall.

Judging from a recent article in Tunis Hebdo, at least one journalist has already gone over the deep end. He writes that his life is now so boring as to be virtually without purpose. "Where" he asks "are the corruption scandals, the swindlers with the foreign bank accounts, the politician who imports ten foreign cars at government expense?" I can sympathize with him. On and off for almost a decade I have eaten my couscous and salade tunisienne under the severe gaze of Habib Bourguiba, dressed regally in a black formal coat and heavy gold chain. The picture has been removed; a cage with a canary has taken its place. Life seems full of absurdities these days at the Baghdad restaurant.

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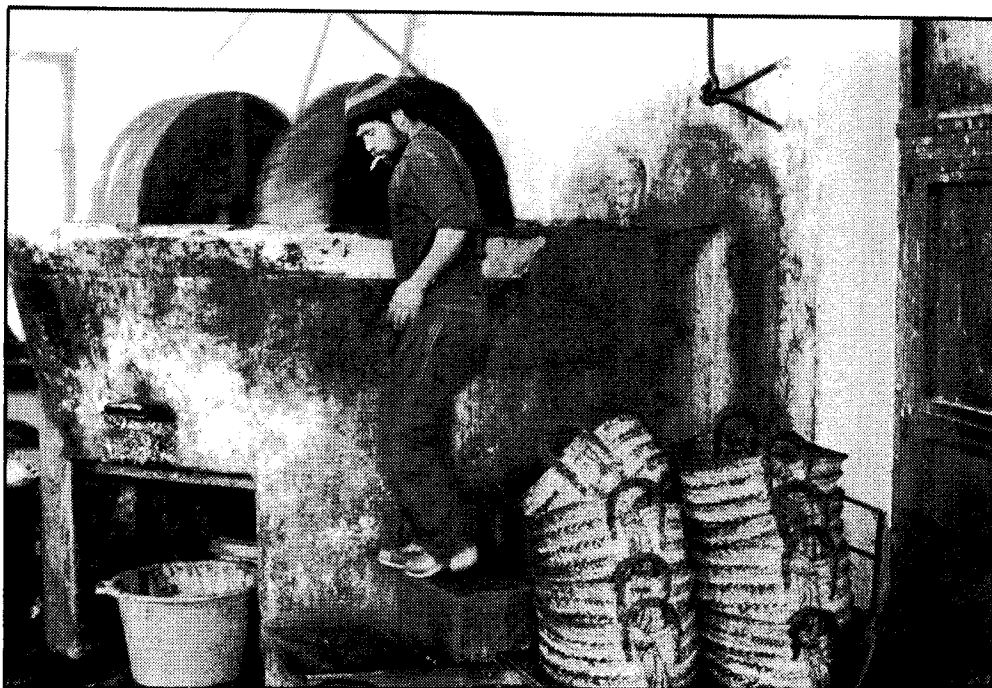
To its credit, the new government has not tried to make much political capital out of the demystification of Bourguiba. President Ben Ali has struck most careful observers as almost the opposite of his predecessor: sometimes self-effacing, somewhat of a team player, little impressed with the trappings of presidential power. He has cultivated the kind of

stereotypical image American politicians like to project: he invites a young boy to the palace who wrote him a letter; he meets with soccer enthusiasts after a victorious game against Morocco; he shows up at a moment's notice at orphanages and hospitals. (He went even a bit further. On one orphanage visit he pulled back the covers of a seemingly clean and well-made bed. He threw a temper at the sight of the dirty sheets.)

What has struck me is that there were no great outpourings of joy when Bourguiba was replaced. There also were no emotional support rallies for Ben Ali. Perhaps that has been the real legacy of Bourguiba: a profound apathy that will make Ben Ali's task even more difficult. The government publication Dialogue ran a recent poll among Tunisia's youth, asking questions about Mr. Bourguiba's Parti Socialiste Destourien. Most had never visited the party's local cell; many didn't know its role in the struggle for independence.

It made me think of the apathy I found a few months ago in Algeria and Morocco, and of the generational difference no North African ruler has been able to bridge. Perhaps the most remarkable fact, however, was that Dialogue published the poll. When I was here a year ago that would have been unthinkable. Neither would the Islamic movement have been mentioned in the official press at the time, except as bands of religious fanatics and terrorists. The opposition parties would not have been able to publish their opinions freely.





There is a delightful independent weekly available now, called Réalités. It regularly airs the dirty linen of current politicians and opens up the stuffy backrooms of the former regime. Still flush with its newfound freedom, the standards seem a bit lax, the commentaries a bit naive and preachy, its special reports sometimes more invective than investigative. But, oh, what delightful surprises!!

One recent article asked, rhetorically as it turned out, "What happened to the jewels of the royal family?" The wife of Tunisia's last king - who was deposed by Bourguiba in 1957 - had been an ardent jewelry collector. She employed at one point (full time) three Parisian jewelers who created for her an endless collection of gaudy diadems, bracelets, brooches and rings. When the couple left the royal palace the day of the monarch's abdication, most of the jewels were left behind in a couple of suitcases (!).

Realités's reporter conducted interviews with several people who testified that Mr. Bourguiba's ex-wife Wassila had been seen several times with some of the baubles. He even managed to track down one of the French jewelers who confided to him that he had spotted several of his old "creations" (noblesse oblige) for sale in Paris jewelry shops. The implications were clear. To round off his story, and to add simultaneously a pièce de résistance and a human touch, the reporter then quoted the king's granddaughter. It seems that she once encountered Wassila at a diplomatic reception who showed off her jewels and then added that "these once belonged to your grandmother."

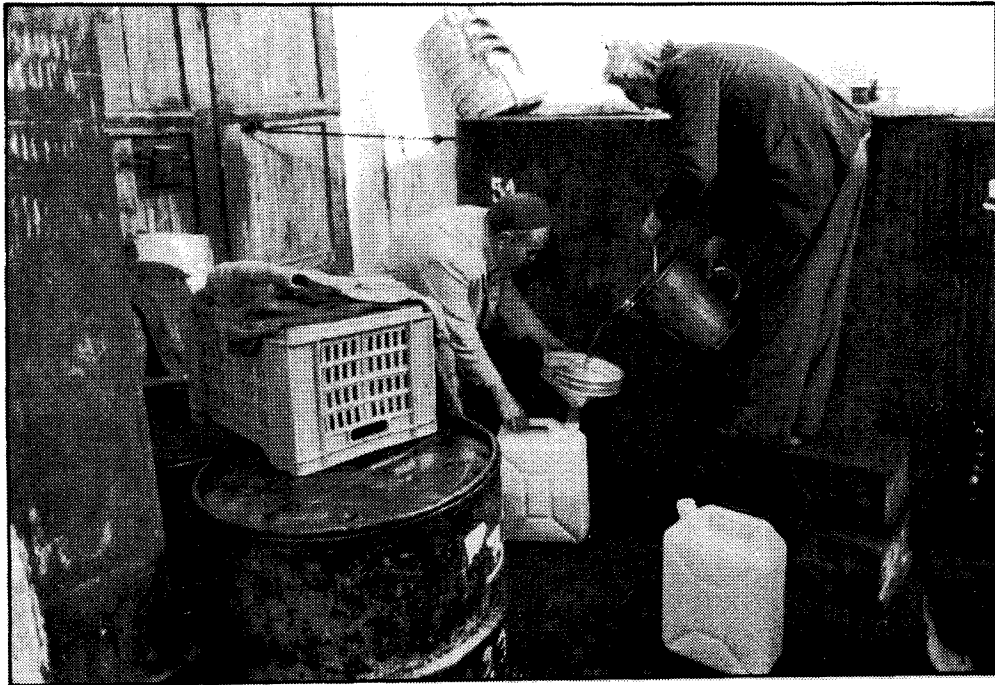
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It was a delightful show of journalistic bravura and it demonstrates the extent to which the Tunisian press has opened up, at least for subjects not sensitive to the current regime. A little bit less enjoyable was what happened in the aftermath of The Washington Post's recent visit to the country. The Post had sent one of its most experienced reporters to write a couple of articles about Tunisia after Bourguiba. The visit by Jim Hoagland and Mrs. Kathryn Graham, the paper's chairman, was highly advertised in the local press. They were able to interview Ben Ali and a number of officials while in the country. When Mrs. Graham left the country she received a picture of herself and Ben Ali, signed by the president. (I again thought of American politicians and public image campaigns!!)

Hoagland then published the article which was promptly translated and reprinted in La Presse under the headline "The Washington Post - Ben Ali acts in the spirit of liberalization" - the original title was "Ben Ali: Tunisia's Enigmatic President." Since the Post article touched upon a number of highly sensitive political issues in Tunisia, I compared the original and the translated version.

The comparison yielded only a couple of details, but those are suggestive. In the original article Ben Ali had told Hoagland that he was thinking "very seriously" about dissolving the Tunisian parliament (which is totally controlled by the PSD). Hoagland also suggested that Ben Ali had suddenly converted to democratic principles after having been





Bourguiba's hard-line security chief and Minister of the Interior - a charge I made in DJV-17 and DJV-22. Both paragraphs were omitted in the translated version. The first because it is perhaps still too risky in Tunisia, at least until Ben Ali's own position is clearly consolidated, to talk openly in the local press of a concrete political move that could alter the power of the party. The second for the more obvious reason that the new regime doesn't want to see itself tainted by hints of lingering authoritarianism and the opportunistic adoption of democratic principles. (Particularly in view of the fact that the Tunisian press has a by now standard explanation of Ben Ali's refusal to adhere to more liberal political principles while serving Bourguiba: he loved democracy as much as anyone else but he was just a technocrat doing his job!)

Another problem with the translation was that it contained editorial inserts that made it difficult to distinguish between the original and "annotated" article which added a few favorable comments on Ben Ali. On the whole the Tunisian version put him in a somewhat better light than the ambiguous shade Hoagland had cast. Compared to the propaganda value Bourguiba would make of certain selected passages of Western press reports, this more or less faithful rendering was remarkably candid. But the standard of comparison, as Ben Ali himself so often suggests, should not be the Bourguiba era.

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The new Tunisian president has been waging a vigorous campaign for visibility and legitimacy. Being able to quote favorable reviews in the international press is a powerful symbolic act. The Washington Post article had been preceded in La Presse a few weeks earlier by a compilation of clips from US newspapers in which a number of United States Tunisian experts pronounced the take-over on 7 November 1987 constitutional. (I feel a little uneasiness about this seeming imprimatur from America's academic community - in part because, strictly speaking, it was impossible to say whether or not Ben Ali's action was indeed constitutional. Under Tunisian law the president could be deposed for reasons of incapacity but the constitution never specified who was authorized to make that judgment. Ben Ali assumed he was and no one opposed him.)

The campaign and Ben Ali's public relations efforts to many observers also suggest that the new president is still anxiously consolidating his position against possible detractors. Among those the PSD old guard remain the most formidable. A special party congress is planned for July this year but Ben Ali will want to settle certain issues before it takes place: without firm roots in Tunisia's political machine he would be at a slight disadvantage when it meets. For all those reasons the public relations campaign seems likely to go on for a little while; at the same time some PSD officials may well be removed before the July congress opens.

All the best,



The pictures in this report were taken at an olive press in Nabeul. Traditional presses use camels or donkeys to rotate the wheels that grind the olives into pulp. The most modern ones are almost completely automatic - only a few exist in Tunisia - and require virtually no manpower. The smaller business shown in the pictures could be called semi-traditional. It uses an electric motor instead of animal labor to turn the wheels but everything else is still done by hand.

Once the olives have been ground they are collected in a wooden tin-lined wheelbarrow. A number of young apprentices then scoop little buckets of the mash into flat, round containers woven from reeds. These are piled up between the two jaws of several 1930 presses, a very exacting job that only the foreman and the owner perform. Even with care the piles often need to be straightened out with sticks that are jammed between the presses and the stacks of ground olives. The result is a cloudy liquid that looks quite repulsive (the smell is always delicious) but after storage and filtering turns into lightgreen transparent oil. The pressed pulp hardens into thin flakes that are used for heating.

The press works non-stop for a few winter months each year. Its owner produces the oil on commission, he does not own the olives. As a result

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the building is constantly filled with farmers, dressed in heavy wool burnouses and skullcaps, who are unloading olives or picking up oil. Gathering at the olive press often becomes as much a social event for them as for midwestern farmers unloading corn in the Fall at the local elevator. Except that tractors and pick-up trucks will likely be replaced by ragged-looking donkeys and (at Nabeul at least) an occasional camel; and coffee yields to darkgreen mint tea brewed in a corner of the building, watched over by the youngest apprentice.

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