

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

LCB-7

The Bizerte Affair

Tunis, Tunisia
July 31, 1961

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Tunisia is a calm, civilized little country. Centuries of settled bourgeois life have tended to trim off the extremes and leave both virtues and vices in the middle zone -- the average Tunisian might be smug but never rude, diligent but hardly dynamic, calculating but always honest, brave enough but disdaining the folly of lost causes...

Into this well-ordered world the battle of Bizerte came as a cosmic shock. It was almost as if nature's laws had been changed. Tunisia has, of course, known a long history of struggle with France, but the struggle was more a dialogue and above all a trade dispute -- a fight to organize, gain recognition, bargain collectively, and then renegotiate the old contract at regular intervals.

What a contrast with the rest of the former French empire. France has bombed Damascus, fought Abd al Krim in Morocco, Abd al Qadir and then the FLN in Algeria, and Ho Chi-Minh in Indo-China; but the record in Tunisia has been less violent than -- to stick to the above simile -- the history of American trade unionism.

France never had to put down a serious uprising in Tunisia, and the inevitable "incidents" arising out of the colonial experience were mild in their human toll. Even the French air raid on Sakiet Sidi Youssef in February 1958 left only 50 dead.

However, the brief Bizerte battle of July 19-23 between the French army units defending their base and the motley crew of army, national guard and untrained (often also unarmed) volunteers on the Tunisian side left the Tunisians with over 600 dead and 1,100 wounded. This new dimension now constitutes the most important factor in the problem for most Tunisians. Only the casualty list can fully explain the sense of shock, the soul-searching and the harsh reproaches directed this time not just against the paratroopers and General de Gaulle but against French civilization and against the West. Violence destroyed the previous clear distinction between the two Frances, one martial and domineering, the other fraternal and espousing universal ideas of justice and liberty. Tunisians used to resist the former while relying on and believing in the latter. Now they are claiming it was all a mirage. There never was but one France -- that which now occupies Bizerte.



"There never was but one France" -- French paras patrolling Bizerte

Does this drama have a villain? No, in many ways the whole problem is more like a kaleidoscope which when tilted gives a different pattern. Let us try to see several different pictures of the kaleidoscope by posing and answering a few simple questions, and to start at the beginning:

Question #1 -- Who started it?

There can be no doubt that the Tunisian government by re-opening in the early days of July its campaign for the "evacuation and liquidation of the military base at Bizerte" disturbed the status quo and, to this extent, "started" the incident.

This, however, was not a bolt out of the blue. The Bizerte base has remained a point to be settled by "later negotiations" from independence in 1956, and since the French bombing of Sakiet Sidi Youssef in February 1958 the demand for total evacuation has been consistently posed. There was even a sort of blockade of the Bizerte base from the time of the Sakiet incident until one month after the May 1958 coup which brought de Gaulle to power. De Gaulle soon agreed to the evacuation of the five other bases in Tunisia with their roughly 50,000 military personnel,

and the blockade ended; but the status of Bizerte remained to be settled.

Then in February 1959 Bourguiba, in an effort to solve the Algerian problem, offered to cede Bizerte to the French in return for Algerian independence. The offer, of course, went unheeded and was soon withdrawn.

Another campaign for evacuation to be accompanied by a "blockade" of the base was called off only at the last minute in January 1960 when word was received of the uprising of Algerian colons with tacit support from elements of the army. Bourguiba let it be known that he did not want to weaken de Gaulle's hand at such a juncture.

In October 1960 an agreement went into effect restricting the Bizerte base complement to needed technical personnel, but the thorny question of Bizerte's eventual status remained untouched. Finally, after the Bourguiba-de Gaulle talks at Rambouillet in February 1961 there was optimism in Tunisian circles that out of this Franco-Tunisian detente would come a settlement on Bizerte.

The ostensible reason for the timing of the present campaign was that the French were extending one of the runways in order to accommodate jet aircraft. On July 6 Bourguiba sent a special emissary to de Gaulle requesting immediate negotiations for a settlement of the Bizerte problem. Carefully staged manifestations and demonstrations got under way in various parts of Tunisia, and within a few days volunteers began to pour into Bizerte.

No response was immediately forthcoming from de Gaulle, but the French stand in press statements and diplomatic exchanges was soon clear -- no negotiations under "pressure." Soon there were over 6,000 volunteers, mostly members of the Neo-Destour youth movement, digging trenches or erecting barricades around the French bases. (Unfortunately for all concerned, as will be seen, there is no single base at Bizerte but rather several isolated points which rely on the regular civil road system in the Bizerte area for intercommunication.) At this point no one seemed to be taking things too seriously, and French troops good-naturedly gave water to the weary trench-digging volunteers.

However, the campaign was definitely on, and in a speech before the National Assembly on July 17 Bourguiba announced that a blockade of the Bizerte base would begin two days later. At the same time a Tunisian army patrol was to march to Borne (boundary-marker) 233, located about 45 kilometers beyond the present de facto southern border where they would raise the Tunisian flag.

Here a brief digression is necessary. The whole Bizerte campaign was complicated by a simultaneous Tunisian claim to its share of the Sahara. The claim to extend southward to Borne 233 (based on a 1910 Franco-Ottoman accord) was to be pressed. A much greater claim into the Sahara on Tunisia's south-west border with Algeria would be negotiated with an independent Algeria. Strong words had already passed between the Tunisians and Algerians on the Sahara, and in the July 17 speech Bourguiba went further and attacked Ferhat Abbas in a thinly-veiled reference. There is no need to follow the

Sahara problem here for Bizerte provided the crisis. However, it should be noted that most observers gave as much, or even more, attention to the Sahara problem until just before the actual blow-up in Bizerte. As a result there was probably a less serious endeavor by third parties to find a modus vivendi on Bizerte. Bourguiba's two-front campaign was possibly a mistake.

The following day, July 18, one day after Bourguiba had publically committed himself to the National Assembly and 12 days after the original Bourguiba note to de Gaulle, the General gave his formal answer. In effect, Tunisia was to be held responsible for any attempt to forcibly change the French position either in Bizerte or in the South. And the French position was defined to include the free intercommunication among the various parts of the base. Presumably even the type blockade effected for almost five months in 1958 was excluded.

As the French continued to send in paratroops to beef up their Bizerte base (in early July operating strength was down to about 6,000 most of whom were technicians) the Tunisian government on July 19 ordered its army to fire on all aircraft violating Tunisian air space.

Firing began on the afternoon of July 19 when the Tunisian national guard opened up on a French helicopter. Later in the day there was firing on French observation planes, and finally on planes transporting troops. Apparently, only at this time did the French forces return fire.

The fact that the Tunisian forces fired first is not in dispute.



"A two-front campaign" — Tunisian troops in the South

Question #2 -- Tunisia is a sovereign state. There is no treaty governing the French base at Bizerte (The problem was left for later negotiation in the several conventions of 1955 leading to Tunisian independence). France has been stalling on her promise in June 1958 (fully three years ago) to negotiate the status of the Bizerte base. Under these circumstances didn't the Tunisians have the right to take all necessary steps, including force, to make their sovereign wishes respected? Thus, what does it matter if the Tunisians fired first?

Such an argument is too sweeping. Of course, a state can claim the right to defend its vital interests, just as a state can claim the right to resist aggression in its most restricted sense, i.e. to fire back when fired upon. The argument is best considered in less absolute terms.

In essence, a small state unable to impose its will on a larger state can only rely on (1) outside pressure and/or (2) internal harassment strong enough to have a nuisance value but not so onerous as to invite retaliation. It is the tactic of the terrier against the bull. On the other side of the coin the large state trying to maintain rights that grew out of a former protectorate or colonial period often finds its margin of maneuver greatly restricted. If it does not intend to impose its will in the last resort (as Russia did in Hungary) it can only (1) stall or (2) negotiate and continually give in. Now the impression has grown on all sides (and especially since Suez) that whatever their reluctance in granting independence, the Western colonial powers have recognized that independence can not, or should not, be withdrawn. In short, the terrier gets more aggressive and the bull more frustrated.

Seen in this light each side was acting true to form. Tunisia was asking, wheedling and then finally resorting to harassment. France was stalling. In short, the means and limits of the harassment and of the retaliation now become all important. Wasn't it too much to actually open fire on the French?

clear

Also it seems tragically that no such step was originally planned. In his July 17 speech to the National Assembly announcing the blockade and the march to Borne 233 Bourguiba stated,

"I will not give the details (i.e. of the campaign) but I will say that it does not differ greatly from that put into effect after Sakiet Sidi Youssef. A plan has been drawn up in collaboration with the party, the army, the national guard and the youth organizations. It will, without resorting to violence and without aggression against any individual, express our resolution to regain those portions of our territory still occupied either in the North or the South." (emphasis mine)

What caused the change? Was it de Gaulle's answer to the July 6 Bourguiba note received only on July 18? Jean Daniel, a French journalist much admired in North Africa (later badly wounded while covering Bizerte) wrote in L'Express of July 20 that he was interviewing Bourguiba at the time the de Gaulle answer was received, and Bourguiba

"after having studied the note of three typewritten pages, took off his glasses and turning toward me declared calmly, 'Eh bien! c'est l'epreuve de force.'"

Or was it the dispatch of additional paratroops which pushed the Tunisian president into giving his fateful order to fire on French aircraft violating Tunisian air space?

Question #3 — Was French military retaliation necessary? Could they not be content with a token resistance? Wasn't it possible to defend and provision even the isolated parts of the Bizerte base since France had complete control of the air? At least couldn't the French authorities wait one or two days to see whether the Tunisian blockade was to be token or effective?

Such a stand would have required considerable patience and coolness. It obviously entailed some risks as well. Conceivably the Tunisians could have stormed and taken one of the isolated parts of the base, but such risks seem minimal. It is most unlikely that actual attack at any point was ever intended. In any case, it is axiomatic that the strong do not lose prestige in forbearance.

De Gaulle had, however, apparently committed France to some action in insisting that base rights included unobstructed intercommunication between the various parts. By any reasonable interpretation he would seem to be within his rights, but was it a wise decision? This is tantamount to denying Tunisia any right of harassment under any circumstances, and such a stand is just as untenable as extreme Tunisian claims based on sovereignty.

However, weren't there certain French domestic considerations ruling out a "too proud to fight" stance at Bizerte? At a critical point in the Algerian negotiations and in view of the recent army coup which almost succeeded, could de Gaulle ask the military to bear a situation that might parallel what the British experienced for so many months in Suez before 1954? For any other French leader such a consideration might have been paramount; but it seems clear, given what is known of de Gaulle's personality, that this was his decision alone. De Gaulle was irritated, and when that happens there is no room for nuances.

Question #4 — Even given the limited French military objectives of clearing access to Bizerte harbor and establishing communications between the various parts of the base, wasn't there unnecessary slaughter? Also, didn't the paras and Legionnaires commit atrocities?

The Tunisian claims that the French used napalm has not, apparently, been substantiated. Napalm leaves a distinctive long black streak, and no such signs have been seen by neutral observers. The charred bodies can be explained by the explosion of gasoline tanks in trucks and other vehicles found in the streets where fighting took place. One Tunisian corpse had the celtic cross of the Algerian colon terrorist O.A.S. traced on his chest apparently by a bayonet. A single case is bad enough, but one can hardly prove a case from this slight

evidence. At least one mosque was desecrated, and this senseless, revolting act must be weighed in the balance.

Still the total picture to emerge is that of the havoc left by a battle-hardened, brutally efficient organization of shock troops rather than that of calculated terror and atrocities.

Then why the large number of Tunisian casualties? (The French announced only 30 dead and 50 wounded on their side.) This is explained by the hopeless confusion of untrained, often unarmed, civilian volunteers mixed in with the army not to mention the civilian population living in the areas of fighting. Several observers have reported that the Tunisian army often had to hold its fire since their own civilian volunteers were in between them and the French forces.

If the Tunisian government really planned an armed battle then they must bear a heavy responsibility for the heavy casualties. It seems, however, that only harassment was intended.

Question #5 -- Leaving aside the immediate responsibility for the incident wasn't de Gaulle at fault for not showing more consideration for Bourguiba's demands before the boiling point was reached?

Here a resounding yes must be recorded. In fact, it seems inconceivable that the affair could have been handled so badly. Presumably de Gaulle did not want to weaken his bargaining position with the Algerians by concessions on either Bizerte (which would be a precedent for the Mers el Kebir base in Algeria) or the Sahara which is, after all, the main obstacle to a Franco-Algerian settlement. Still gestures were possible. Bourguiba's visit to de Gaulle in February of this year committed him in the eyes of the world to a bold stand -- peace in Algeria was possible through negotiations, and co-operation between France and the Maghrib was both possible and desirable.

Since Rambouillet the Algerian negotiations ebbed and flowed, but Bourguiba was isolated. Even the simple matter of an exchange of ambassadors between Tunisia and France, agreed upon in principle at Rambouillet, bogged down. (France had withdrawn her ambassador ever since a suburban development scheme had impinged upon the diplomatic immunity of the ambassador's residence.)

It is the classic fault. One takes the friendly moderate for granted while making concessions to the avowed antagonist, without even realizing how such a stand undermines the position of the friend.

Question #6 -- Wasn't Bourguiba at fault for forcing a showdown at this time when de Gaulle was still tied up in negotiations with the Algerians and the impending crisis in Berlin?

A qualified yes, if Bourguiba still had hopes of working closely and effectively with France in the immediate future, but this stand was exactly what was being questioned. Bourguiba now felt a real need to hedge a bit on his French investment, and most of the blame for this feeling can go back to de Gaulle's lack of comprehension vis-a-vis Tunisia from Rambouillet to July.



World public opinion the ultimate weapon -- Bourguiba at his first press conference after the Bizerte battle

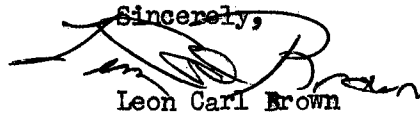
Still, disappointment and pique is not a valid excuse for action. In the past Bourguiba has tended to avoid exploiting his opponent's weakness (from his pro-Allied stand in the Second World War to calling off the January 1960 blockade of Bizerte when de Gaulle was in difficulty in Algeria), and has instead concentrated on exploiting the absurdity or the logical contradictions in his opponent's position. This is not only noble. It has paid off in gaining the support of public opinion in France and the West -- a powerful weapon for a small state. This time Bourguiba was not true to form. He appeared to be grabbing his chance while others were pre-occupied, and his Sahara claims did not appear all that self-evident. As a result much of the public support he can usually count on in France and the Free World did not materialize. Since the ultimate weapon of this campaign was to be world public opinion, this appears as a bad mistake.

In a sense Bourguiba and de Gaulle have stumbled into a position where much has already been lost and where face and prestige is now committed on both sides. What is really needed is that spirit described by the late Veep, Alben Barkley, in one of his countless stories.

Two farmers driving their team of mules approached a one-lane bridge at the same time. Grabbing his whip and urging on his mules the first asserted, "I never back down for a damned fool." Whereupon the other reined in his team and retorted, "That's all right. I always do."

One is hard put to imagine either de Gaulle or Bourguiba as this second farmer. This time the story will have to be changed, and friends may need to build another lane to the bridge. It may already be too late.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Leon Carl Brown', written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

Leon Carl Brown

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