

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-16

c/o Hotel Saint Georges
16 Rue de Cologne
Tunis

June 1987

THE ASSOCIATION DES ETUDES INTERNATIONALES.

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

Dear Peter,

Ramadan has ended without much fanfare. Contrary to what my friends at Medina Jedida predicted there have been no major confrontations between the government and the islamacists. A few days before the month ended I was taken on a late night ride to meet some people of an organization called the Mouvement d'Action Directe (MDAD). Despite my familiarity with the islamacist groups in Tunisia, I had never heard of it. The evening started in the lobby of the International Hotel on Avenue Bourguiba. There I was met by a longtime friend who had convinced the MDAD people to talk to me. It had taken several weeks and all my friend's persuasion to get to this point. From the hotel we walked into the medina. After a few minutes' walking through the maze of small alleys we ended up at the kasbah (the old fortified part of town) where a car was waiting for us. The two people who accompanied my friend and I took elaborate precautions to make sure we were not followed. About a half hour later I was inside a dilapidated farmhouse in Tunisia's countryside where another bearded young man and a young woman were waiting.

Most conversations with islamacists in Tunisia require precautions; the police will pick up any member seen talking to a foreigner. From the intricate measures the four MDAD members had taken to avoid detection I had an inkling that what they had to say would be extraordinary. It was indeed. For almost an hour - with someone constantly guarding the dirt road leading up to the farmhouse - they talked to me about their vision of Tunisia's future. Their message was simple and clear: the Bourguiba regime is illegitimate and needs to be replaced by a government in tune with Islamic precepts. The use of violence is unfortunate but necessary.

It was the most explicit endorsement of violence I had heard since I started talking to islamacists here in Tunisia. The casualness and calm with which they mentioned death and destruction unnerved me. All four at the farmhouse were young people and reasonably well educated. They had few doubts that sooner or later they would be picked up by the police and might well spend many years in prison.

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PICTURES

- Page 3: Selling dates in the medina.
- Page 4: Tunisia imports few cars or spare parts in order to save hard currency. European cars, when available, cost 2-3 times as much as they fetch in Europe. As a result a very lively sunday morning second hand market has developed along Avenue Mohamed V. The building in the background is the Hotel du Lac, once a fashionable meeting place for tourists.
- Page 5: President Bourguiba's mosque in Monastir, one of the most expensive public buildings in Tunisia's history. The picture is taken from the muslim cemetery.
- Page 6: Entry gates to the mosque.
- Page 7: As other North African countries, Tunisia once had a sizeable jewish population. Except for the remaining community on the island of Jerba most have left for Israel or Europe. The picture is of the now totally neglected jewish cemetery in Nabeul, a resort town about 40 miles from Tunis. Although Nabeul still has a few Jewish families, many had already left by 1962 when the local rabbi was mysteriously murdered one night in the alley beside the synagogue.
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I have no idea how representative a group like MDAD is of islamic movements here in general. I would guess that they are tiny, quite often very small splinter groups of the main Mouvement de Tendence Islamique. Contrary to what the government-controlled newspapers here have been saying about these more radical groups, the MDAD members at least did not seem to consider Iran as an example to follow. They repeatedly mentioned Egyptian and a Pakistani Islamic thinker but showed little interest in Khomeyni-style views.

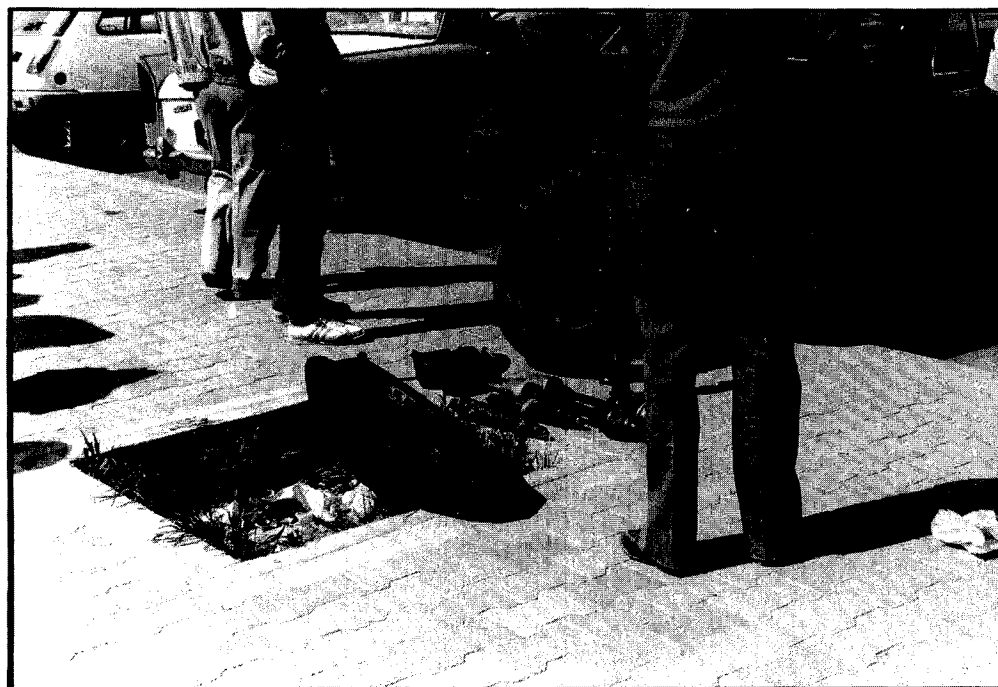
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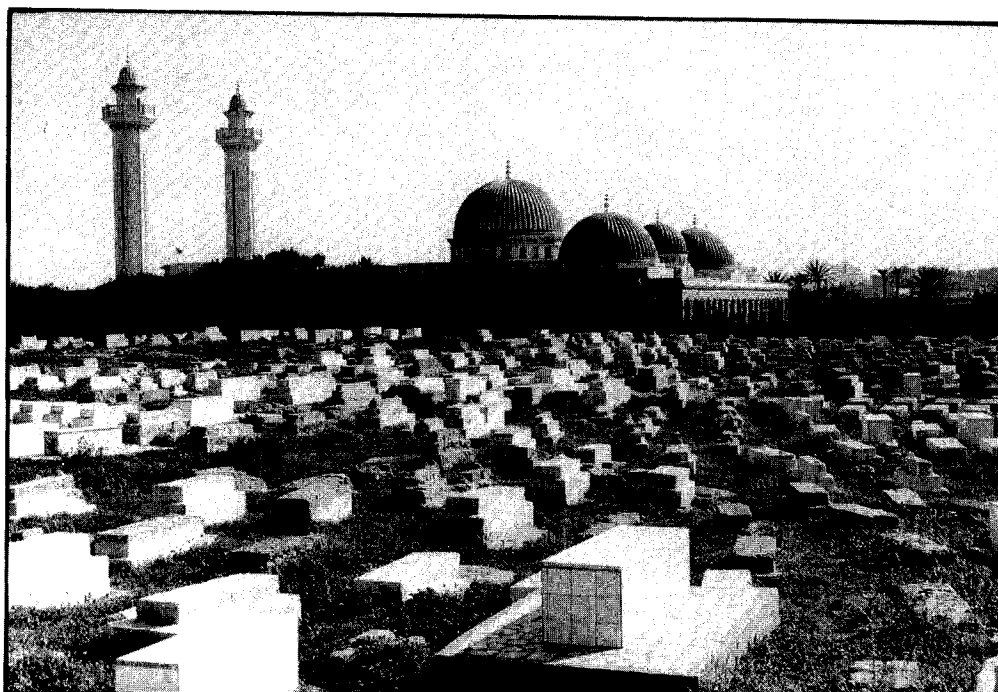
A few weeks before this encounter I participated in a more public gathering: a conference on the Iran-Iraq war organized by Tunisia's Association des Etudes Internationales. Tunisia had just broken diplomatic relations with Iran, accusing its local diplomats of fomenting revolution here. The newspapers have been full lately of articles implicating the Khomeyni regime. According to these exposés in the government-controlled press Iranian diplomats have been channeling money and arms through France into Tunisia. Although my encounter with a few MDAD people is not representative, I am not convinced by the government's recent allegations. Some Tunisian fundamentalists clearly do advocate a violent solution to the continuing crisis of leadership in the country. But almost none, including the MDAD people, look toward an Iranian-style solution.



The recent expulsion of the Iranian diplomats left a void at the conference that was quickly and efficiently filled by the Iraqi delegation. Under the very competent leadership of Dr. Aziz from Baghdad University's political science department - I wonder what political science means in a country like Iraq? - the Iraqis put on quite a sophisticated performance. I had expected some crude propaganda - and there was some - but on the whole the different presentations by the Iraqi team were sophisticated and rather refined. Needless to say, half the cheering section was Iraqi. You could recognize them by their Saddam Hussein mustaches, their English-looking suits, straight hair (as opposed to the Tunisians' curly coiffures) and a rather dour demeanor. Above all by their willingness to talk at length - particularly if they find out you're from the United States.

The colloquium was run by Mr. Rachid Driss, the president of the Association des Etudes Internationales and one of the country's most distinguished diplomats. The Association is more or less the Tunisian equivalent of the Council on Foreign Relations in the US. Founded in 1980, it counts among its membership many of the country's political and social elites. In a country where freedom of expression is often curtailed, Mr. Driss and his organization must balance professional integrity and undue government interference. It is in part due to Mr. Driss's stature that the Association has been able to produce colloquiums that are both of high

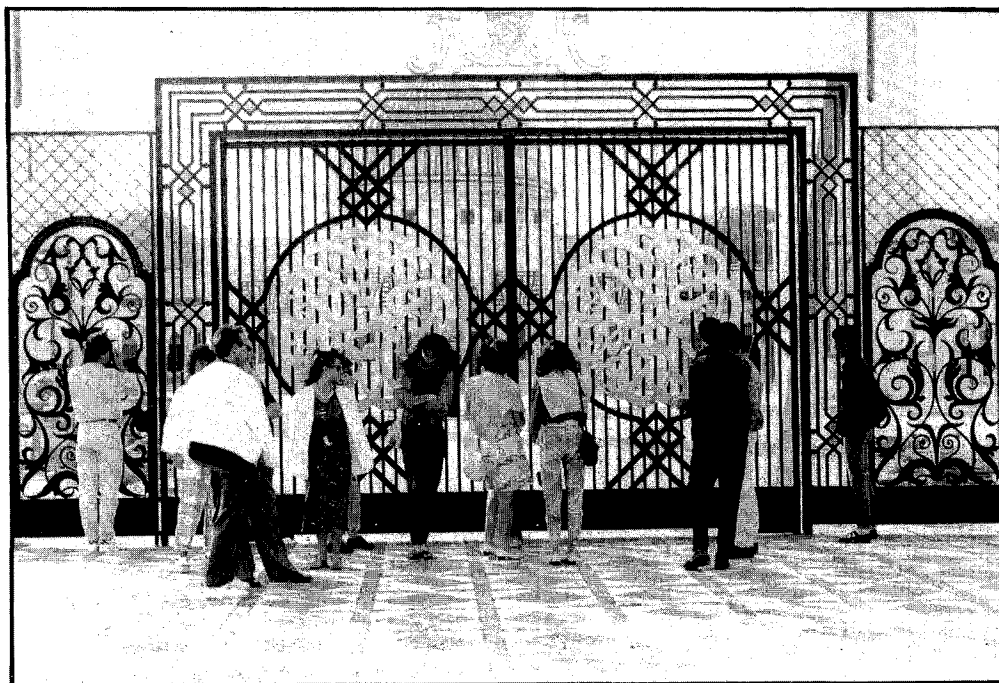




quality and sometimes quite critical of public policy. (At a meeting I once heard Mr. Driss dress down a couple of young historians during a discussion on wartime collaboration. They were sticking closely to the more or less official version that there was no Tunisian collaboration with the Germans and the Italians. Mr. Driss made clear, in an impassioned voice, that no one was served by rewriting history.)¹

The conference was a rather sedate affair, with Mr. Driss ably guiding the proceedings. The format of conferences in the Middle East is a

¹ The exchange took place during a three day seminar on the History of the National Movement. The continuing series of seminars is heavily subsidized by the government. The proceedings are published by the official printing office and, in my estimation, closely reflect the viewpoints of the government. The latest seminar was opened by Mohamed Sayah, the current Minister of Education. Mr. Sayah is an oldtime confidant of President Bourguiba. He has for years been editing and annotating the Supreme Combattant's speeches. Sayah's entire allocution was a eulogy to Bourguiba and Bourguibism, something a few of the participants eagerly expanded upon.



little bit different than what we are used to in the West. They usually start at least a half hour late. Then there are the interminable interpellations from the audience - it is considered impolite to interrupt commentators who, as a result, tend to go on ad nauseum. Soon it was hard to tell who was a participant and who was just a spectator - some of the participants never got to speak and some of the spectators simply remained seated around the conference table after delivering their comments. All of this was made worse by the incredible clouds of cigarette smoke that wrapped the proceedings in a haze of pollution.

Then, just as I was about to doze off for a few minutes, an acquaintance from one of the research institutes in the city took the podium. He delivered a paper tracing the background of the conflict. And, in a manner that only academics and budding academics can manage while retaining a modicum of seeming intelligence, he brought to bear upon those two unhappy countries the weight of several centuries of hatred. He wove into his narrative the Turkmans, the Seljuks, the Ottomans and a number more wandering tribes who all, even if minimally, have left a legacy that now contributes to the problem. It was a masterful and pyrotechnic performance - complete with dramatic hand gestures, pouting lips, the removal of glasses who were then waved in the air as if some magic wand. I rated the performance 10 and the plausibility of the argument 2 or 3. But since delivery is half the battle he still emerged as a strong performer.



Another gem at the conference was entitled - "Is the Iran-Iraqi conflict a war between Iran and Iraq or between the Arabs and the Persians?" The length of the title alone should have frightened me. The presentation duly started with a detailed introduction of what constitutes an Arab or a Persian - all too long, I'm afraid, and even then no conclusive definition emerged!! Another Iraqi, with a particularly pronounced nasal tone of voice, took up where his colleague left off. It made me think I was in the mosque, listening to the muadhin recite one of the Quran's longer suras.

An interesting sidenote was that the proceedings were in literary arabic. But since some of the Tunisian participants hardly knew enough arabic to participate, there was always a summary in french at the end. One of the speakers flatly acknowledged his arabic wasn't up to snuff and gave his talk in french.

The colloquium was followed by an Iraqi diplomatic reception. Despite the impending Ramadan liquor was served. After about three scotch-and-waters I sauntered over to the Iraqi ambassador. I was introduced by the ubiquitous Dr. Aziz as an American researcher - which instantly made the ambassador shift his drink from right hand to left hand in order to shake my own.

Unfortunately the three drinks had slightly clouded my composure. The ambassador, hearing I'd been in Cairo, insisted on speaking masri. From

behind the veil of alcohol I managed a semi-intelligent conversation. Fortunately it was the end of the evening and the ambassador himself had had a few drinks already. So we chatted away, much to the despair of his bodyguards. He was very inquisitive about recent events in New York, as was Dr. Aziz, and inquired if I had ever visited Iraq? One of his guards gave me a little card at his insistence. I was to contact the man at the embassy with his personal compliments if I was interested in "seeing Dr. Aziz's university in Baghdad."

I thanked him profusely, saying I might indeed want to visit the country at some future date in order to look over the Roman ruins. This produced a look of "what in the world is this guy talking about?" in his eyes. It was a marvelous evening after all, and I am still impressed with the efficient show the Iraqis managed to put on.

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As I have hinted at in this and previous reports - and will write about at greater length in DJV-17 - Tunisia's rulers have severely curtailed freedom of expression these last few years. President Bourguiba has never had much patience with criticism. As he grew older this impatience slowly turned into some kind of paranoia. I distinctly remember that when I first came to Tunisia in 1978 Le Monde had been banned for several months after a critical contribution by the local correspondent.

It still happens, but with a much greater frequency. A couple of weeks ago a little article appeared in the weekly edition of the same newspaper. It was entitled "Les deçus du Bourguibisme" - the disappointments of Bourguibism. A few minutes after I picked up my copy at the Africa hotel someone from the Ministry of Information called and ordered all copies off the shelf. It appears as if the censor had overlooked the article. At about the same time Jeune Afrique printed a very critical four page piece, analyzing the political events of the last year. This time the censors caught the article in time. Since then the magazine has been banned. (As most censored articles this one also was quickly copied in France and sent through the mail to a number of people in Tunisia; I located a copy within a few hours.)

There are currently no opposition newspapers. Under Mohamed Mzali - who was prime minister from 1980 until his escape last year² - there was a

² I mentioned his cloak-and-dagger escape in one of my previous reports. Since then a number of readers, including one of my most faithful commentators, Mr. Kenneth Cline, have asked me to fill in the details about the event.

After Mr. Mzali was sacked as prime minister in 1986 it was not long before a vicious campaign against him started in the government-controlled newspapers. This kind of treatment has been quite common in Tunisian political life: because of the intense rivalry among the elites lining themselves up for the post-Bourguiba period, any rival who is dismissed by the Supreme Commander automatically becomes a pariah. The mechanics of elimination are also quite predictable: first a villification campaign in

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momentary liberalization. Since 1983, however, the majority of opposition publications were systematically denied permission to publish. A few months ago Ar-Rai, the last one still on the market, decided to end publication. According to its editor it was no longer able to appear under the conditions the censor imposed.

Only a few lacklustre government-approved newspapers are left. On a morning visit to one of the local coffeeshops you're likely to see people listlessly flipping through the pages of La Presse or As-Sabah. What is dished up is utterly predictable. There are always at least three pictures of the Supreme Combattant in his favorite chair at the Carthage palace. Frequently there is a small but prominent article in the left hand corner of the first page, stating in rather formal language that "Today the President of the Republic has made a walk in the gardens of the presidential palace in the company of X."

And lest the man in the street becomes dulled by the predictability of these tidbits of information - newspaper reading seems an almost exclusively male enterprise in Tunisia - the back page always sports some

the newspapers, then charges of corruption and mismanagement, a trial and a jail sentence. The most famous recipient of such a treatment was Mr. Ahmad Ben Salah, the architect of Tunisia's socialist experiment in the 1960s. In 1971 Ben Salah was sentenced to ten years hard labor in prison. He fled the country in 1973 and now lives in Paris.

Mr. Mzali undoubtedly recognized the pattern when the first critical articles started to appear and after his son-in-law was arrested on a charge of fraud. He quickly arranged to leave the country. He was initially stopped at Tunis airport and told he could not leave. He then arranged to be smuggled across the Tuniso-Algerian border near the village of Hammam Bourguiba in Tunisia's rough and hilly northern region. As he later told al-Dustur, a magazine published in the Gulf, he left Tunisia with only an attache case and the clothes on his back. (Upon reading the article, a journalist who has closely followed Mr. Mzali's career commented to me "there was no need to take more with him - the rest was waiting in Switzerland." In the official indictment several accounts were mentioned.)

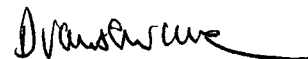
Brahim Hayder, of the opposition Mouvement de l'Unité Populaire (MUP) got quite a chuckle out of the story when he recounted it to me. He pointed out that it was also at Hammam Bourguiba that Mr. Ben Salah had crossed the frontier when fleeing the country: "socialist or capitalist, the end is always Hammam Bourguiba."

About a month ago Mr. Mzali was finally convicted in absentia to fifteen years of hard labor. He lost all his possessions in Tunisia and his wife - unable to leave the country until now - has been relocated in a humiliatingly tiny apartment in Tunis. But Tunisia's former dauphin, whom Bourguiba often referred to as "my son", did not leave the scene without having taken precautions! He has been writing a series of letters from exile in Paris, detailing the financial wrongdoings of many of his opponents. And his latest book, Lettres ouvertes à Bourguiba (Open Letters to Bourguiba), is about to appear in Paris. Tunisia's samizdat fans are waiting breathlessly.

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skimpily clad European or American starlet. For a few days last week the Caucasians yielded to Brazilian samba queens who had won prizes in Rio's carnival.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Van der ..." with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Received in Hanover 7/24/87