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## Tunisia: The Colonized Road to a Democratic Identity

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## Tunisia: The Colonized Road to a Democratic Identity

The death of one Tunisian man by self-immolation in 2010 created uprisings in 18 other Arab countries in what is known as the 2011 Arab Spring. As a result, Tunisia overthrew its long-standing autocratic government and establish a democracy; it is the only nation who has managed to maintain those changes since 2011. As the first point of protest and the only success story, what makes Tunisia different from the other 18 nations? While there has been research on why Tunisia has succeeded, there is little on how Tunisia's colonial history under France for 75 years might have affected Tunisia's uprising, protests, democratization, and continued success. This paper is not comprehensive, but it does indicate some of the lasting effects of French colonization that have irrevocably shaped Tunisia. Through linguistics and education, economic reform, and political evolution, the French caused a progression of society in Tunisia that facilitated success as a democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Colonization and its long-term post-colonization effects are slowly being understood and acknowledged the farther the world comes from traditional imperialism. There are conflicting opinions in the literature about why the French wanted Tunisia. There is general agreement that the initial reason was to secure the prized French colony of Algeria and to keep Tunisia out of the hands of other European powers;<sup>1</sup> but its reasons for staying invested have varied from economics to expanding the influence of French culture.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, the French economic and linguistic infiltration into Tunisian society caused a restructuring of the linguistic, educational, economic, and political styles and institutions of the country. By making Tunisia a protectorate instead of a colony, France separated Tunisia from other members of the Arab world and especially the rest of the Maghreb.<sup>3</sup> These changes, herein described and categorized as cultural, economic, and political, likely made Tunisia the source and the success story of the Arab Spring.

### Culture

The cultural changes, limited here to linguistics and thereby education, are argued by authors Krista Moore and Leila Bel'Kiry<sup>4</sup> to have had the most immediate impact on Tunisia. French had been the *lingua franca* of diplomacy since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when France took control of Tunisia, French was an essential for those doing business with Europe.<sup>5</sup> The use of "*Mission Civilisatrice* for the French...(where) they sought to establish their culture as superior to the pre-existing local cultures" was standard practice.<sup>6</sup> Linguistic hierarchies are typical in post-colonial cultures as they assign value to a language for its use in

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, Christopher. 2016. "Chapter 1." Chapter. In *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 9–33. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge. (pp. 18).

<sup>2</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." International Studies Honors Projects. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 1, 35).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 6).

<sup>3</sup> Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 21).

<sup>4</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." International Studies Honors Projects. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13); Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. Bel'Kiry, Leila Najeh. 2021. "A Historical Account of Linguistic Imperialism and Educational Policy in Tunisia: From the Independence to the 'Jasmine Revolution.'" *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 3 (1): 32–45. doi:10.24256/itj.v3i1.1742.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 6).

<sup>6</sup> *Idbi*.; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." International Studies Honors Projects. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 35).

cultural identity, economics, or politics.<sup>7</sup> In Tunisia, there are three descending levels: French, Arabic, and dialectical Arabic (much of which had taken on French aspects).<sup>8</sup> Arabic of any kind was regulated to the home and religion.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, there was an enduring sense that French was for the elite and was superior to the native Arabic<sup>10</sup> and therefore the best way to modernize Tunisia post-colonization.<sup>11</sup> Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba began his term in 1957 and pushed Arabization, but he realized that Arabic did not translate well for use in government and education sectors. This forced him to return to French, which he used to modernize Tunisia and reaffirm ties to the West through multiculturalism.<sup>12</sup> Enter code-switching; author Krista Moore did research in Tunisia on codeswitching within the population in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and found that Arabic is still regulated to the home and religion, while French is used for everything else, at least by those with higher education.<sup>13</sup> What is truly fascinating is that her sample of the population did not perceive the languages as rivals but as working in tandem to create Tunisian society.<sup>14</sup> The Tunisian population has coopted their colonizer's influence and made it their own.

The educational system was overhauled by the French in 1883, so where the European settlers or *colons* went, French schools appeared and the Tunisians who attended those schools learned the secularist ideas of the French rather than the native Islamist ones.<sup>15</sup> In 1900, inclusive and female education programs created an knowledgeable population that would take on positions in the governing of the protectorate.<sup>16</sup> Colleges were built and the preeminent students studied in France, training the next generation in French ideology that one day would be turned on the colonizers in the form of nationalist movements.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the increased education and job opportunities for the natives upset the *colons*, who demanded France scale back education efforts and force natives into more traditional jobs.<sup>18</sup> France was meant to partner with and protect Tunisia so it could modernize, instead the colonizers spent more time subjugating them.

Education was reformed again when the French left in 1959, this time by the new President, Habib Bourguiba. There was no substantial native infrastructure remaining and most government officials were French educated. Bourguiba prioritized modern education, female education, and languages (Arabic, French and English), to include opening his own institute to teach and learn Arabic and English.<sup>19</sup> In his 1958 reform plan, Secretary of State for National

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<sup>7</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 4).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 42).

<sup>8</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 6).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 39-40).

<sup>9</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 6, 9).

<sup>10</sup> Bel'Kiry, Leila Najeh. 2021. "A Historical Account of Linguistic Imperialism and Educational Policy in Tunisia: From the Independence to the 'Jasmine Revolution.'" *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 3 (1): 32-45. doi:10.24256/itj.v3i1.1742. (pp. 37).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 7).

<sup>11</sup> Bel'Kiry, Leila Najeh. 2021. "A Historical Account of Linguistic Imperialism and Educational Policy in Tunisia: From the Independence to the 'Jasmine Revolution.'" *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 3 (1): 32-45. doi:10.24256/itj.v3i1.1742. (pp. 36-37).

<sup>12</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 7).

<sup>13</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 9).

<sup>14</sup> *Idbi*.

<sup>15</sup> Blackman, Alexandra. 2019. "Ideological Responses to Settler Colonialism: Political Identities in Post-Independence Tunisia." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3251615. (pp. 8). Blackman, Alexandra. 2019. "Ideological Responses to Settler Colonialism: Political Identities in Post-Independence Tunisia." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3251615.

<sup>16</sup> Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 68-69).

<sup>17</sup> Alexander, Christopher. 2016. "Chapter 1." Chapter. In *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 9-33. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge. (pp. 22).

<sup>18</sup> Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 72).

<sup>19</sup> Bel'Kiry, Leila Najeh. 2021. "A Historical Account of Linguistic Imperialism and Educational Policy in Tunisia: From the Independence to the 'Jasmine Revolution.'" *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 3 (1): 32-45. doi:10.24256/itj.v3i1.1742. (pp. 37).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages

Education Mahmud Elmessedy tried to modernize Tunisia by pulling the educational system back from full Arabization. Arabic did not have the vocabulary needed for the study of science and technology introduced by France; instead, French was adopted as the second national language for use in education and formal settings.<sup>20</sup> Despite this push for Arabization, in the 1960's the belief that French was "the doorway to prosperity" remained prevalent in the school system.<sup>21</sup> It divided Tunisian society: the educated and elite multilingual Francophones and the lower, less educated, arabophone workers. Educated Tunisians became proficient at code-switching, and while this sounds divisive, Moore's research shows that this encouraged the multilingualism and modernization that Bourguiba and Elmessedy were trying to facilitate.<sup>22</sup>

Before 2011, French media was still more popular than Arabic media and French continued to influence Tunisian dialect.<sup>23</sup> The division between French in professional situations and Arabic at home has remained and is indicative that French, Arabic and code-switching are likely to remain as they became a part of the national identity.<sup>24</sup> Moore writes, "Tunisia... found a way to move its identity forward from colonialism, exploiting the legacy of that era to benefit the country's global economic and political integration... Tunisia has come to terms with the post-colonial realities of its linguistic identity."<sup>25</sup> If only every post-colonial state could do so.

## Economics

The Tunisian economy was in disarray when France took over in 1881, and it is one of the reasons scholars, such as Waleed Hazbun and Mounira Charrad and Daniel Jaster, believe they did so. The French interest increased as the number of European settlers swelled in Tunisia, fueling commercial trading and expanding the Tunisian market for European projects.<sup>26</sup> The French created policies that benefited the French *colons* over Tunisians and resulted in Tunisians being taxed higher and owning less land.<sup>27</sup> A French tax reform increased the amount of money coming into Tunisia by 1888.<sup>28</sup> This also facilitated *colon* access to the French markets and technology, effectively putting the traditional artisans out of business.<sup>29</sup> The French confiscated Tunisian lands and then sold it to the *colons*, putting the Tunisians to work for lower pay on their own lands and prohibiting them from obtaining enough wealth to become investors.<sup>30</sup> It was not

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and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 7).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 44).

<sup>20</sup> Bel'Kiry, Leila Najeh. 2021. "A Historical Account of Linguistic Imperialism and Educational Policy in Tunisia: From the Independence to the 'Jasmine Revolution.'" *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 3 (1): 32–45. doi:10.24256/itj.v3i1.1742. (pp. 38).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 45-46, 48).

<sup>21</sup> Bel'Kiry, Leila Najeh. 2021. "A Historical Account of Linguistic Imperialism and Educational Policy in Tunisia: From the Independence to the 'Jasmine Revolution.'" *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 3 (1): 32–45. doi:10.24256/itj.v3i1.1742. (pp. 37).; Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 42-43).

<sup>22</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 39-40).

<sup>24</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." *International Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 54-55).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibdi*. (pp. 81).

<sup>26</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. "The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 83).

<sup>27</sup> Culbertson, Shelly. 2016. *The Fires of Spring: A Post-Arab Spring Journey through the Turbulent New Middle East*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. (pp. 35).; Charrad, Mounira M., and Daniel Jaster. 2015. "Limits of Empire: The French Colonial State and Local Patrimonialism in North Africa." *Patrimonial Capitalism and Empire*, 63–89. doi:10.1108/s0198-871920150000028003.

<sup>28</sup> Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 55).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibdi*. (pp. 58).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibdi*. (pp. 66).

until WWI, when 80,000 hectares were on sale as *colons* were conscripted, that middle-class Tunisians saw their opportunity.<sup>31</sup> But at the end of the war, many of the *colons* returned for their land, imports increased, and inflation became worse. This was aggravated by French taxes to improve infrastructure to attract more *colons*. This culminated in strikes and demonstrations in 1919-20, which escalated when the bad harvests caused famine and disease for two years.<sup>32</sup> The French then made efforts “for the cultivation of all implanted arable land” that the Tunisians took as an attempt to get the remaining *habous* lands away from Tunisians, they were not wrong.<sup>33</sup>

Before the French, collective land was broken into several types by use and ownership, relevant here is *habous*, either land held to support a family (private *habous*) or to support religious or charitable associations (private *habous*).<sup>34</sup> The protectorate incentivized more *colons* to move to Tunisia to expand their control of the economy, including roads, trains, and communications systems in rural agricultural areas (usually *habous* lands) and make the settlement of land and transport of goods easier on the *colons*.<sup>35</sup> The changes made by the French extended from economic greed. One of the key aspects of collective property that the French weakened was the *waqf* system, which fell under public *habous*; the use of collective land to fund traditional Islamic schools (*kuttabs*, Koranic primary schools).<sup>36</sup> These types of funds made up 80% of the land contracts taken by the French and were more likely to occur in the area around Tunis and the north of the country than the center and south.<sup>37</sup> The privatization of the land by *colons* robbed the native community of income for the *kuttabs* and often forced their closure, thereby forcing the students to French schools.<sup>38</sup> As Alexandra Blackman’s work describes, in “areas with high colonial settlement, Tunisians were more likely to attend French schools than in areas with low colonial settlement and... more likely to attend schools with European settlers.”<sup>39</sup> Blackman connects the attendance of Tunisians to French schools with more secular political identities, while those in *kuttabs* were likely to have religious political leanings.<sup>40</sup> It depended on the area’s usable land for agriculture or mining, if it had none, the area held little interest for the *colons* and retained the native schools. Thus, the *colons* economic greed weakened the Islamic education system and increased secularism among the Tunisians.<sup>41</sup> This secularism would become essential to revolution.

Only in 1955 did the French allow Tunisia to regain full rights to property and economic autonomy, but maintained economic ties.<sup>42</sup> After the French left, trade unions and cooperatives sought to rebuild and strengthen the institutions that colonialism had weakened, following a “vision...of societal pluralism where the state structures would coordinate the interaction between autonomous societal institutions.”<sup>43</sup> President Bourguiba put Ahmed Ben Salah in

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<sup>31</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 80).

<sup>32</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 81).

<sup>33</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 82).

<sup>34</sup> *Idbi*.

<sup>35</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. “The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 84).; Alexander, Christopher. 2016. “Chapter 1.” Chapter. In *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 9–33. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge. (pp. 19).

<sup>36</sup> Blackman, Alexandra. 2019. “Ideological Responses to Settler Colonialism: Political Identities in Post-Independence Tunisia.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3251615. (pp. 7).

<sup>37</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 31-32).

<sup>38</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 1, 6-7, 32).

<sup>39</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 2).

<sup>40</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 2).

<sup>41</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 6-7).

<sup>42</sup> Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 131).

<sup>43</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. “The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 80).

charge of creating their “shared vision of a strong state” and socialist programming that was meant to centralize the economy through state organizations.<sup>44</sup> Cooperatives were used for political and economic control instead of development and the unions became upset with the leadership and went on strike for more autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Their success led to economic ties with France. Bourguiba, and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after, encouraged economic collaboration with France, and the European Union (EU), to keep the economy liberalized and France somewhat dependent.<sup>46</sup> France helped Tunisia access money from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the EU while Tunisia provided France an ally with a low-cost workforce.<sup>47</sup>

When Ben Ali took power in 1986, the real corruption began. He restructured the Tunisian economy in the mid-1990s to facilitate this.<sup>48</sup> Un known until after the 2011 revolution was how large a role the French bureaucracy played in enabling that. Ben Ali would go to Paris to work on economic agreements with the French, but really, he was on vacation to play with the French elite and working on behalf of his wife’s mafia-styled Trabelsi family.<sup>49</sup>

## Politics

Before the French, Tunisia was an amalgamation of far-off Ottoman rule under the native ruling Bey authority and tribal politics. While France maintained the Bey structure, it created a system that subjugated the native population in a way that only an authoritarian power could disrupt.<sup>50</sup> The Tunisians needed a cause led by a single person to unite behind and push out the colonizers. This authoritarian regime would create a system even more corrupt than the French before it and finally instigate another revolution in 2011 in favor of democracy.

The French did not do as much damage to the existing government structure in Tunisia as they did in some of their other holdings, it is one of the biggest differences between the protectorate of Tunisia and French colonies. When France met with comparatively minimal resistance, they “almost blindly ignore(d) and pave(d) over existing tribal and kinship political ties...”<sup>51</sup> Instead, they utilized the existing structure of *qa’ids* (mayor or governor) and other local officials who would have reported to the Bey and remained in power as an intermediary between France and the Tunisians.<sup>52</sup> Position with real authority was replaced with *colons*.<sup>53</sup> Not that the pre-colonial system made it through intact but with French officials, the system was adjusted to fit the French and any intuition not applicable was deconstructed or replaced.<sup>54</sup>

These political changes had momentous influence on the social and economic parts of society and under those hardships drove the rise of the nationalist movements. The nationalist movements pulled ideas from the colonizers, having been exposed to ideas of freedom and society through the new system of education.<sup>55</sup> As author Hazbun says, “There is no “authentic”

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<sup>44</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 100).

<sup>45</sup> *Idbi*.

<sup>46</sup> Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 6).

<sup>47</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 103).

<sup>48</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 12).

<sup>49</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 345-346).

<sup>50</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. “The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 78-79, 83).

<sup>51</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 84).

<sup>52</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 83).

<sup>53</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 84).

<sup>54</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 84).; Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 19).

<sup>55</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. “The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 86-87).

space outside of this colonized space. All anti-colonial movements as well as post-colonial ones pull together ideas... drawn from a variety of indigenous experiences which in some ways have encountered and engaged colonialism.”<sup>56</sup> The Tunisian nationalists acknowledged the impact that French colonization had on their movements while it slowly destroyed Tunisian society. They could not avoid that these ideas came from a “colonized space,” therefore none of their ideas were original, but variations of the ideas introduced to them by the French. This is especially true since most of the elite members of the nationalist groups were French educated.<sup>57</sup>

The three groups of nationalists are the Young Tunisians (*Jeunes Tunisiens*), Destour, and Neo-Destour. The Young Tunisians were members and children of the old aristocracy under the Ottoman rule and wanted to reconstruct the state in a manner that would include the Tunisians as equal to the French *colons*.<sup>58</sup> They were not revolutionaries though they were treated as such by the French and would not last long past WWI, those that remained would join the Destour. Destour was interested in restoring the old order, made mostly of the children of those officials replaced by the French. The Destour wanted economic and social powers back and to return Tunisia a pre-colonial state; this includes the traditional Islamic leaders and structures such as *qa'ids*.<sup>59</sup> They wanted a constitution, parliament, universal suffrage (both Tunisians and French), basic freedoms, and access to administrative government positions; a Tunisian government alongside the French.<sup>60</sup> But when affronted and criticized by the French in the 1920's and 30's, the Destours took action, defending Islam and mobilizing the population.<sup>61</sup> The French were nervous, the population was rebelling intellectually.

From Destour came the more secular Neo-Destour. Their plan was to capture the state and begin anew with an authoritarian-statist ideology and cult of personality under Bourguiba.<sup>62</sup> The party consisted of the disgruntled masses, with secular ideas linking back to the French changes in education. French investment in land varied, in Blackman's study “for each additional percentage point increase in French colonial expropriation (of land), there is a 5-percentage point increase in the probability that the region mobilized for Bourguiba.”<sup>63</sup> She talks about how this has politically divided the Tunisian population: those who attended the French schools are more ideologically secular, while those went to the Islamic *kuttab*s are more supportive of the Islamist parties.<sup>64</sup> The French literally created the parties that would overthrow their colonial rule.

Neo-Destour's political ideology steered the its' actions pre-independence as they “built a mass-based popular movement” that called on browbeaten classes to join them.<sup>65</sup> Bourguiba believed that a mass-based movement was the only way to fight French repression and gain

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<sup>56</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 87-88).

<sup>57</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. “Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands,” *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 7).

<sup>58</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. “The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 89).

<sup>59</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 90).; Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 24).

<sup>60</sup> Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 85).

<sup>61</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 95).

<sup>62</sup> Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 64).

<sup>63</sup> Blackman, Alexandra. 2019. “Ideological Responses to Settler Colonialism: Political Identities in Post-Independence Tunisia.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3251615. (pp. 19).

<sup>64</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 41).

<sup>65</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. “The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 91-92).; Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 226).; Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 135).

international support.<sup>66</sup> The Neo Destour Party had to counter the colonial power in social and economic institutions while simultaneously trying to repair and build a new state.<sup>67</sup> The leadership started by building a pyramidal hierarchy within the party. In 1934, Neo-Destour created a government parallel to the French, with each level reporting to a more elite level. The local branches reported to the federations and congress that then reported to the National Council and Political Bureau. The National Council, made up of members from the lower levels, would create and agree upon decrees and legislature that the Political Bureaus would then enforce.<sup>68</sup>

When Bourguiba took control and set up his government, most of the officials were French educated.<sup>69</sup> State building followed the centralized hierarchical strategy to exploit what resources the new nation had in the form of the trade unions, cooperatives, and economic organizations.<sup>70</sup> The French and international community were impressed by the relative lack of violence when the Neo-Destour under Bourguiba took power. Bourguiba's ability to unite most of the population behind him allowed the country to function and recover without war.<sup>71</sup> Their success was because it created a constitution, a parliament, an elected government, and a general sense of equality by combining the efforts of all who came before them to free Tunisia.<sup>72</sup>

Note that Bourguiba had not created a democracy but an authoritarian regime. He and the "leadership gradually internalized the practices of the colonizer."<sup>73</sup> He simply realized that he needed the structures and institutions in place to help him rule, just like the French.<sup>74</sup> Life under Bourguiba was not always better than under the French; the Tunisians were once again oppressed by an elite that was trying to westernize the country without political reform.<sup>75</sup> By the time Ben Ali took power in 1987, it was truly an autocratic state. Enabling Ben Ali to become the corrupt dictator that took Tunisia 24 years to oust.

## Revolution and Change

All of the above stops short of the 2011 revolution because it is the events preceding the uprisings that are comparable. The actions of the nationalists against the French correlate to the anti-government protestors in 2010; the favoritism of the French versus the corruption of the Ben Ali regime; the poverty, unemployment, and dissatisfaction of the middle class, in both eras, that demonstrated the frustration of the Tunisian population. This section will look at the events of the 2011 revolution, the reactions of the French to the uprising, and the resulting democracy.

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<sup>66</sup> Alexander, Christopher. 2016. "Chapter 1." Chapter. In *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 9–33. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge. (pp. 10).; Perkins, Kenneth J. 2014. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 124).

<sup>67</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. "The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 79).

<sup>68</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 91-92).

<sup>69</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Languages and Loyalties: Shaping Identity in Tunisia and the Netherlands," *Macalester International*: Vol. 25, Article 12. (pp. 7).

<sup>70</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. "The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77–106. (pp. 80).

<sup>71</sup> Alexander, Christopher. 2016. "Chapter 1." Chapter. In *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 9–33. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge. (pp. 32).

<sup>72</sup> Culbertson, Shelly. 2016. *The Fires of Spring: A Post-Arab Spring Journey through the Turbulent New Middle East*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. (pp. 34).

<sup>73</sup> Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 17).

<sup>74</sup> Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 64).

<sup>75</sup> Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 209).



On 14 January 2011, President Ben Ali fled Tunis for Saudi Arabia following intense pressure from protesters sparked by the actions of Bouazizi, the man who died in protest.<sup>76</sup> The world was surprised, none more so than the French. While the Tunisian population in Paris celebrated, the French government was upset, they had supported Ben Ali since he took power in 1987. While Ben Ali helped the French with the fight against terrorism, they ignored the human rights abuses under the regime. The French also did not believe the regime could be ousted.<sup>77</sup> Days before Ben Ali fled, a French Minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, told the National Assembly that the rebellion in Tunisia was “a complex situation (and) that it was not for the French government to give any lessons to the regime;” she then went on to offer French military support to the Ben Ali regime.<sup>78</sup> She was later revealed to have been a close friend to Ben Ali and his family and had gone on a holiday with them and her family outside Tunis while the protests were going on the previous December.<sup>79</sup> Even though the French government did not endorse her statements, she was not the only one openly backing the Ben Ali regime.<sup>80</sup>

Tunisia was in an uproar, responding on social media ‘Merci la France!’.<sup>81</sup> The countries had a mutually most favored nation status under Ben Ali, how could the French government not come to his aid? Ben Ali had often gone to Paris to organize deals and increase his wealth.<sup>82</sup> The protestors took up the phrase ‘Degage!’, supposedly a phrase from the revolution against the French, it was used to taunt Ben Ali soldiers.<sup>83</sup> Author Andrew Hussey interviewed Tunisians around this time and when asked about the revolution one man said, “We thought that Europeans would help us, that the French would give us money and aid... (they) really they despise us.”<sup>84</sup> They never forgot that the French did not believe in their cause and slandered it.

Having been ruled by autocratic regimes since their independence, the Tunisians had to start their democracy from scratch, and what they came up with continues today.<sup>85</sup> An oppressed society with minimal personal freedoms became one that is not afraid to speak openly against something the government does.<sup>86</sup> Dubbed the Jasmine Revolution,<sup>87</sup> author Shelly Culbertson wanted to know why the Jasmine Revolution was the only successful uprising. Culbertson

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<sup>76</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 339).; Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 152).

<sup>77</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 341).; Hannoun, Abdelmajid. 2021. *The Invention of the Maghreb: Between Africa and the Middle East*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 285).

<sup>78</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 342).; Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 333).

<sup>79</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 342-343); Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 103).; Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 333).

<sup>80</sup> Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 103).

<sup>81</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 342).; Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 6).

<sup>82</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 345-346).

<sup>83</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 348).; Culbertson, Shelly. 2016. *The Fires of Spring: A Post-Arab Spring Journey through the Turbulent New Middle East*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. (pp. 16).

<sup>84</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. “Chapter 28 - 31.” Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 350).

<sup>85</sup> Fraihat, Ibrahim. 2016. *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring*. New Haven Connecticut, CT: Yale University Press. (pp. 116).

<sup>86</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 121).

<sup>87</sup> “Internet Revolution,” “Facebook Revolution,” “Twitter Revolution,” “Wikileaks Revolution,” “Aljazeera Revolution,” “Dignity Revolution,” “Sidi Bouzid Revolution,” “Bouazizi Revolution” Gana, Nouri. 2013. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (pp. 6).

believes it is the society's dedication to working out their differences, especially between secular and Islamist factions. She said, "people used a curious phrase: the need to respect 'the other;'" and in doing so they humanized all sides and made the conscious decision to concede and find common ground.<sup>88</sup> Hussey's interviews also pointed out the advantage of Tunisia's high education levels thanks to Bourguiba.<sup>89</sup> Others said that with such a complex history, Tunisians were obligated to protect it, the more variations in people and ideas, the better the result.<sup>90</sup>

Today, the trend towards nationalism continues, much like Neo-Destour versus Destour, these factions are usually along the secular versus religious lines. Blackman's study on the correlation between the concentration of French *colons* and secular beliefs among the Tunisian population demonstrates this division has continued to the modern era and been influenced by the rise of Islamist parties in the Arab world.<sup>91</sup> Tunisia's main secular party can find more support in areas of the country that historically had higher levels of colonization.<sup>92</sup> As a result, beliefs about secularism can predict political affiliation amongst Tunisians.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusions

When researching Tunisia, one will often find Tunisia lumped in with the rest of the Maghreb, if not overshadowed by Algeria.<sup>94</sup> It is this afterthought status that makes Tunisia unique. The relationship between France and Tunisia, before and after independence was characterized by "its inferior, often cowed position towards" France.<sup>95</sup> But Tunisia was never subjugated the same way that Algeria or even Morocco was.<sup>96</sup> The land confiscations and influx of *colons* were far worse in Algeria than Tunisia.<sup>97</sup> The Tunisian experience under the French "reshaped (its) very nature...and gave them a new language and tools for political change and social reform."<sup>98</sup> The French attachment to their language has continued to effect Tunisia, and other Francophone countries today.<sup>99</sup> Even with the nationalists pushing for Arabization, the French language was too deeply engrained in society to be removed, creating a unique nation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>100</sup> Because of this, Arabization never became the political debate that it did in the rest of the Maghreb.<sup>101</sup> The Tunisian identity was remolded by the French education system's uneven distribution within the country when the greed of the *colons* disrupted the traditional *waqf* system and made French schools the only option.<sup>102</sup> Economics pushed the *colons* to

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<sup>88</sup> Culbertson, Shelly. 2016. *The Fires of Spring: A Post-Arab Spring Journey through the Turbulent New Middle East*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. (pp. 19-20, 44).

<sup>89</sup> *Idbi*.

<sup>90</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 27, 38).; Fraihat, Ibrahim. 2016. *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring*. New Haven Connecticut, CT: Yale University Press. (pp. 86).

<sup>91</sup> Blackman, Alexandra. 2019. "Ideological Responses to Settler Colonialism: Political Identities in Post-Independence Tunisia." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3251615. (pp. 11).

<sup>92</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 41-42).

<sup>93</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 46).

<sup>94</sup> Hannoum, Abdelmajid. 2021. *The Invention of the Maghreb: Between Africa and the Middle East*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 23).

<sup>95</sup> Hussey, Andrew. 2015. "Chapter 28 - 31." Chapters. In *The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs*. London, UK: Granta. (pp. 351).

<sup>96</sup> Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 20).

<sup>97</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 21).

<sup>98</sup> Hazbun, Waleed. 1994. "The 1st Annual Ziad Asali International Student Scholar Award – Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1): 77-106. (pp. 87).

<sup>99</sup> Moore, Krista. 2010. "Memories of la Mission Civilisatrice: Language Policy and Postcolonial National Identities in Tunisia and France." International Studies Honors Projects. Paper 13. [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies\\_honors/13](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlstudies_honors/13) (pp. 36).

<sup>100</sup> *Idbi*. (pp. 45).

<sup>101</sup> *Idbi*.

<sup>102</sup> Blackman, Alexandra. 2019. "Ideological Responses to Settler Colonialism: Political Identities in Post-Independence Tunisia." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, February. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3251615. (pp. 6).

further marginalize the Tunisians, creating famine and poverty. These sufferings ignited the nationalist movements that would upset the French rule and install an autocratic state. When the French utilized the existing political structure within in Tunisia, they enabled the Tunisians to avoid the creation of an entirely new governmental system following independence.<sup>103</sup> This is not to say the Tunisians did not suffer but Tunisia managed to survive, heal, and become the protégée for democracy in the Arab world.<sup>104</sup>

Run by Bourguiba and his personality cult, life was not much better than under the French. He moved Tunisia into the international arena behind France. The Tunisians took advantage of the educational opportunities when they could and worked hard to refamiliarize themselves with what it meant to be Tunisian. Under Ben Ali, the relationship with the former colonizer improved. Tunisia backed France internationally and France ignored the Ben Ali regime's human rights abuses. The corruption increased and the plights of the people were again ignored. It took a man setting himself on fire in protest of corruption and his treatment by those corrupt authorities for the Tunisians to rise against their latest oppressor.

The correlation between the Tunisians rising against the French and rising against the Ben Ali regime are undeniable. Linguistically, the French presented a means to become multicultural, allowing European influence into society. Post-revolution, the Tunisian society embraced its Arab side and learned multiculturalism is part of being Tunisian. Economically, the French took over Tunisia to benefit the *colons* and to undermine the natives, pushing the native population into poverty, famine, and disease. Then, Ben Ali's regime was so corrupt it was creating unemployment and demoralizing the population, creating the same browbeaten population that Bourguiba used to create Neo-Destour decades before. The similar treatment of the population by the French and Ben Ali meant a rise in nationalism and political change. The biggest difference is that against the French the Tunisians wanted change as long as it removed the colonizer; in 2011, the Tunisians wanted a change that represented them and would last.

France is not the sole reason for Tunisia's success, but it is imperative that the colonizers effects be considered when talking about that success. France kickstarted the educational reforms that were the foundation for two revolutions. The French economic greed for Tunisian land was vital in motivating the population towards nationalistic tendencies when France pushed them into poverty. The Tunisian displacement of the French in the 1950's gave the Tunisian people a blueprint for political change in 2011. While it is impossible to know if the Tunisian population would have evolved to a democracy or even been better off without the French (the Ottomans and the Bey were running the state into the ground anyways), it would be a mistake to believe that despite the horrors of colonization, it did not shape the nation that Tunisia has become. Tunisia has embraced democracy and held their government accountable, something they have never done before. They remain the beacon of hope to all former colonies.

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<sup>103</sup> Alexander, Christopher. 2016. "Chapter 1." Chapter. In *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 9–33. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge. (pp. 20).; Willis, Michael J. 2014. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London, UK: Hurst & Company. (pp. 21).

<sup>104</sup> Fraihat, Ibrahim. 2016. *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring*. New Haven Connecticut, CT: Yale University Press. (pp. 59).

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