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The American Jewish Committee

May 5, 1956

MEMORANDUM

TO: New York Office
FROM: Paris Office
SUBJ: Developments in Tunisia

We have just returned from a visit to Tunisia. The decision to go there was prompted by two developments of extreme importance, following closely upon each other.

On April 13 the first national assembly in Tunisia adopted the first three articles of the Tunisian constitution. Article 1 proclaimed that "the religion of Tunisia is Islamic and its language Arabic." Article 3 "guarantees liberty of conscience and assures the protection of the practice of religion, within the framework of the law."

On April 22 Dr. Sadok Mokkadem, special envoy of the Tunisian government in the Middle East, declared in Damascus that "Tunisia, united with the other Arab countries by race, religion and language, will adhere to the Arab League and participate in all activities undertaken by it on the international level in favor of Arabism and Islamism." Mokkadem further said that "Tunisia will align itself on the side of the Arab countries in the Palestinian question because Zionism represents one of the aspects of imperialism."

The next day the Tunisian Minister of Information, commenting on Dr. Mokkadem's statement, stressed Tunisia's ties to the Moslem world and declared that Israel was a state founded on injustice; but did not specifically contradict or affirm Dr. Mokkadem's declaration that Tunisia would join the Arab League.

Immediately upon our arrival in Tunis we contacted Jewish community leaders, spoke with ordinary Jewish men and women in all walks of life, and--after agreement with the heads of the community--arranged for meetings with all important ministers in the Tunisian cabinet. We met with Mr. Habib Bourguiba, Prime Minister, Mr. Bahi Ladgham, Vice-Prime Minister, Mr. Mongi Slim, Minister of State, who has been a member of the Tunisian delegation negotiating with France the future interdependence between the two countries, Mr. Ben Yahmad, Secretary of State for Information, Mr. Ahmed Ben Salah, leader of the Tunisian trade unions and Vice-President of the national assembly which is now drafting the constitution, and Mr. Andre Barouch, Minister for Reconstruction in Bourguiba's cabinet, who is Jewish. We also conferred with

Mr. Roger Seydoux, French High Commissioner for Tunisia, and U.S. Consul General to Tunisia, Morris N. Hughes.

We found the Jews in Tunisia in a state of mind ranging from serious concern to near panic. Previously, there had been some Jews who were inclined to believe that an independent Tunisia would, in spirit and fact, assure the equality of Jews within a democratic structure; or, at least, work steadily toward that goal. This time we found no responsible Jewish leader who would express an optimistic attitude. The attitude of the Jewish masses was expressed in an immediate, sharp increase in registration for emigration to Israel. And where, previously, registration had been almost exclusively by poor and impoverished Jews, now there was registration on the part of Jews who belong to what, in Tunisia, would be the middle class; people having some job, some skill, or a small shop. More important Jewish business men held private meetings to consider what they should do. Certain Jewish community leaders got together to discuss if a small special vigilance group ought to be established, which would handle future community relations with the government, and which, in an emergency, might bear the brunt of any government action against the Jewish community.

For, shocked, Jews interpreted the first article of the constitution that "the religion of Tunisia is Islamic and its language Arabic" as a reversal of all previous declarations by political leaders of Tunisia -- and primarily by Mr. Habib Bourguiba, the leader of the neo-Destour party and present Prime Minister of Tunisia -- that Tunisia would be a democratic, secular state. The guarantees of freedom of religion in the third article of the constitution were not considered as real assurances by Jewish leaders who pointed out that they would depend on "the framework of the law" eventually adopted.

Dr. MokkaDEM's statement that Tunisia would join the Arab League produced even a greater shock. In the minds of all Tunisian Jews we met, his statement had only one meaning: they would suffer the same fate as that which befell the Jews in Iraq, Libya, and other countries belonging to the Arab League -- increased hostility, various restrictions and a closing of the doors on emigration.

Tunisian political leaders were well aware of the apprehensions and tensions raised in the Jewish community. In fact, as will be seen, Prime Minister Bourguiba utilized our presence in Tunisia to issue a statement intended to mitigate Jewish apprehension. This, while mildly satisfying, did not change the basic mood of the Jewish population.

Our conversations with Tunisian political leaders were frank, detailed and carried on in a friendly spirit. We sought from them an explanation for the developments described above, and indications as to what would be their future course of action. In varying ways, almost all made the same points:

1. Tunisia will be in fact a lay and democratic state. The assurances given AJC representatives two years ago, said Mr. Bourguiba, are just as valid today as ever. Article 1 of the Constitution merely states a sociological reality: that overwhelmingly, the people who live in Tunisia are Moslem, and their language is Arabic. But this does not mean that the Moslem religion is the state religion. He himself, Mr. Bourguiba pointed out, had opposed an attempt in the Constitutional Assembly to make the Moslem religion the state religion. Article 1, he insisted, would have no legal, juridical or any other consequences affecting the equality or the status of the Jew in Tunisia. Laws and courts will not be based on religion, and Jews will have equal access to all posts, he said. The very fact that there will be a constitution, asserted another minister, is proof of Tunisia's desire to establish a state not based on religion, since a Koranic state would have no need for a constitution.
2. Jewish emigration from Tunisia will be permitted to continue. This was stated unequivocally by Bourguiba and other ministers. For example, Minister of State Mongi Slim declared that if fighting should break out in the Middle East, as in 1948, "Arabs who want to go fight against Israel will be permitted to go. Jews who want to go fight for Israel will be permitted to go." Bourguiba insisted, however, on the following point: "Those who want to leave will be able to leave, but we expect those who stay to be fully attached to this country, and not to have their heads here and their hearts elsewhere."
3. Jewish religious and communal institutions will receive the same kind of support given Moslem institutions, Bourguiba affirmed. Vice-President Bahi Ladgham took particular note of certain suggestions we made (on behalf of the Jewish community of Tunisia, but without indicating our source) for specific measures of support that might be given the Jewish community--e.g., aid to the Jewish community center--that would give Jews concrete evidence of the Tunisian government's intention.
4. Tunisia has not yet made a decision about joining the Arab League. This was implied by Prime Minister Bourguiba and definitely stated by other ministers. They said that Dr. Mokkadem had made his statement independently, that it did not represent the position of the government, and that, indeed, the only text of his statement they had yet seen was that put out by the press services. At the same time, the government had not

wanted clearly to repudiate one of its own ministers, facing his own difficulties while touring the Middle East. While we were in Tunisia, Dr. Mikkadem made another statement in Baghdad in which he said he "hoped" Tunisia would join the Arab League. It is clear that a dispute about Tunisia's adherence to the Arab League is now going on among Tunisian government ministers.

5. With regard to Israel, Bourguiba asserted that he had always felt, and said, that Israel had been founded on injustice, because of the Arab refugee problem. Minister of Information Ben Yahmed had made this a public government position, declaring that "the position of Tunisia vis-a-vis Israel stems from hostility to a form of imperialism which chased out more than a million persons from their country, in order to create this state." Bourguiba and his ministers emphasized, nonetheless, that they had always hoped to modify Middle East tensions and help bring about peace between Israel and its neighbors. When we asked whether the man in the street would be able to distinguish between attacks on Israel and Zionism, and attacks on Jews, Tunisian political leaders insisted "Yes." They pointed to Tunisia's 1948 experience, when the fighting in Palestine had no effect on the security of Tunisian Jews. (No responsible Jewish leader felt that the Moslem masses would be able to make this distinction.)

6. Tunisia is anxious and eager for American recognition and economic assistance. Politically, it would like to be recognized by the U.S. as an independent state immediately, before it begins any negotiations with France. As a matter of fact, the Tunisian leaders asked us to help bring about assistance from the U.S. --but made it clear, for obvious reasons, that they did not want any U.S. aid to appear to come because of, or through, Jewish assistance.

In sum, what Bourguiba and his ministers were saying to us was: Have confidence in us. "I am compelled to maneuver this way and that way, but I know the goal to which I am going, and my purposes remain the same." By this he meant to assure us that he still adheres to democratic principles.

At the same time, Bourguiba and his ministers frankly made very clear to us why they felt they had to maneuver. Their remarks, in paraphrase, can be summarized as follows:

"Tunisia, taking its first independent steps, is beset with a tremendous complex of difficulties of a social, political, and economic nature. This country, with a population of about three and a half million, has between 500,000-700,000 unemployed. The masses are uneducated. The drive for national independence has created great hopes--and if we are to be able to continue to govern we must be able to satisfy at least some of these hopes,

otherwise we, the most democratic element in the country, will fall. That is why we need the financial aid and technical assistance which we know can only come from the west, and not from the Arab League.

"At the same time, we have considerable internal opposition, promoted by Salah Ben Youssef, who is now in Cairo, and who is playing on the xenophobia and the narrow nationalism of our masses. Because of the war now going on in Algeria between Algerian nationalists and the French, Salah Ben Youssef is in a position to decry us as 'traitors' to the Moslem world unless, in positive ways, we show that 'by language, tradition and culture Tunisia is bound to the Arab-Moslem community'. If we do not succeed in this, too, we will fall. Thus you can see why compromises are necessary."

It was in terms of such a general background that Prime Minister Bourguiba, for example, discussed Article 1 of the Tunisian constitution: It was, he insisted, a compromise, designed to ward off a more extreme proposal on the part of fanatical religious elements who are represented in the national assembly and who wanted a Koranic state. Bourguiba felt sure he had given up form, not content--and equally sure that his government could not continue to exist unless it made such compromises, he clearly implied. Bourguiba and his ministers urged democratic and Western peoples not cut itself off from the half of world represented at Bandoeng while remembering that 'psychologically and geographically Tunis is part of the West' and that this would condition Tunisia's foreign policies.

We kept Jewish community leaders in Tunisia fully informed of all our conversations with Tunisian government leaders. We decided, however, not to issue any statements following our visits to Mr. Bourguiba and his ministers, for we thought this might be interpreted as an attempt to reassure the Jewish population of Tunisia, which we felt we had no right to do under present conditions. The government, however, wanted to appease Tunisian Jews. It therefore issued a statement to the Tunisian press about our visit--which was given prominent first-page play in all the Tunisian papers--which read as follows:

"President Bourguiba yesterday had a long conversation with Mr. Zachariah Shuster, Director for Europe of the American Jewish Committee, who is on a visit to Tunis. Mr. Shuster presented to the chief of government his felicitations on his accession to power and informed him that he had come to Tunisia to inform himself about Jewish participation in the construction of the new Tunisian state. President Bourguiba stated that no matter what the external policies of the country will be, one thing is certain: that is, that the internal policy is a

policy of understanding and participation of all Tunisians in the new regime." The Prime Minister said: "No eventual consideration with regard to the external policy can take priority over the imperatives of harmony within the country."

This statement was commented in editorials in three Tunisian dailies, Petit Matin, Tunis-Soir and La Presse. These editorials only elaborated the sense of the statement by Bourguiba and pointed out its significance.

This statement did not succeed in altering the basic sentiments of the Jewish leaders or masses, who have no confidence in general principles in face of the very real possibility that Tunisia may join the Arab League.

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Our conclusions following our Tunisian visit are the following:

While Tunisian government leaders may be sincere in their avowals of democracy and equality, they themselves recognize that they are caught in an international and internal situation where they may be forced, in order to stay in power, to make serious compromises with their principles. The situation is aggravated by the fact that there are ministers in the Bourguiba government itself who would like to see Tunisia turn away from the west, and wholeheartedly join the Arab League.

The country is rapidly moving away from France to fuller independence. The Tunisian government insists that the protocol signed last March 20 between France and Tunisia proclaiming independence left Tunisia completely free to follow its own course. Only a few days ago, the government established a Ministry of War and a Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The French position is that such fundamental changes must await French abrogation of the Treaty of Bardo. Because of difference of opinion on this point negotiations supposed to begin in Paris on May 16, to determine the modality of future French-Tunisian relations, have just been cancelled by Mr. Bourguiba.

At the same time, Tunisia, at a crossroads, has not yet chosen the larger political orbit in which it wants to move. The Algerian crisis, the dispute in the Middle East are both undermining such relative stability as exists in Tunisia and Morocco, and create the opportunity for increased and constant pressures from Cairo and the Arab League. Tunisia does not want to offend the west, knowing it needs American help, but has not yet received such help which it could use to counter-balance Arab League pressure. United States government officials are worried lest France may be too legalistic and slow in its

approach at this time; but want to make no direct contribution to Tunisia, or recognize it at this time, for fear of jeopardizing the French position and losing French friendship. Some Tunisian leaders feel there is no contradiction between joining the Arab League and joining NATO, but this does not seem to be a feasible proposition.

In this state of flux, when Tunisia's future course is not clear, it seems to us that we must act in the following two directions:

(1) Maintain close and continuous contact with the Tunisian government and demonstrate our vigilance during the period that it is laying the foundations of the future state and establishing its relations with the world. Our position as an American organization and as being able to influence to some extent American public opinion gives us an excellent opportunity to maintain contacts with the Tunisian leaders.

We must constantly make sure that Tunisian leaders will know that they will lose important support if they do not keep the doors open for those Jews who wish to go, and assure equality for those Jews who will stay. Given the present incertitude about Tunisia's future, we can expect a steady stream of Jewish migration from Tunisia, to Israel or other lands.

(2) To be in touch with U.S. officials in Washington on the general problems facing Tunisia and the political and economic stakes of the U.S. in that country. There can be no doubt that the future of Tunisia will depend to a great extent on the kind of relationship that the U.S. will establish with that country and the speed with which it will be done. The democratic orientation of Tunisia will be influenced by this factor.

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