

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Voice Out of the Chorus

Tunisia's Position of the Middle East Question (1965–1985)

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Abstract

On the Arab scene, from 1956, independent Tunisia represented an important partner for the West, thanks also to its moderate political stance on the Middle East question. While this choice had placed Tunis on the fringes of the Arab League until the death of Nasser, it had also favored and strengthened its alliance with the West, first with the United States and then with the Western European countries that wished to open a dialogue with the Arab League. During the 1960s, Tunisia's political role remained secondary to Nasser; it was with the Kippur War that the Palestinian question repositioned Tunisia in the Arab world. The signing of the Camp David Accords and the removal of Egypt from the Arab organization allowed Tunisia to take on a leading role in the Middle East question also thanks to the relocation of the PLO to the Maghreb country in 1982. Tunisia's diplomatic and political success, however, was not painless. The presence of the Palestinian leadership on the outskirts of Tunis added an element of insecurity to an economic and social framework that was far from stable, with important repercussions on the end of Habib Bourguiba's regime.

Keywords: Tunisia; PLO; Middle East; Arab League; Bourguiba

Introduction

The essay intends to analyze the Tunisian position on the Middle East issue, taking into account the Tunisian objective of becoming a bridge between the West and the Arab world, in order to better guarantee its economic independence and pursue its national development plans. The reasons for Habib Bourguiba's pro-Western choice, which became apparent even before Tunisia gained independence from France, were due to the need for economic funding to be able to build the nation, and the need to protect Bourguiba's regime from the outside world through military aid. While Western economic and financial support enabled the strengthening of President Bourguiba's regime from 1956 to 1987, on the other hand, Tunisia's moderate stance on international issues, from the crisis in post-colonial Congo to the Khomeinist revolution, allowed the West to find a reliable ally in the Arab and Mediterranean context during the Cold War years. The chronological arc of the analysis develops from 1965, the year of the Jericho speech, which represented President Bourguiba's first official stance for Palestine, and ends with the Israeli bombing of Tunis in 1985, which had the effect of Tunisia rethinking its foreign policy objectives.

The aim of this reconstruction is not only to understand the main junctures at which Tunisian policy on the Middle East question was part of the dialogue between the Arab world and the West, but also to ascertain whether it had consequences for the Bourguiba regime and what they were. The Italian and international historiography on European and United

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States (US) policy in the Middle East has undervalued the role played by Tunisia on the question (Calandri et al., 2020; Möckli & Mauer, 2010; Leish, 2003), preferring to focus on more involved actors such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon or Syria.¹ Although there are more recent works, these did not take into account the dialogue between the Arab world and the Western bloc and the political dynamics in the Mediterranean between the 1970s and 1980s (Laskier, 2004; Abadi, 2017). The essay, therefore, starting from the mid-1960s, traces the main stages in Tunis's handling the Middle East and Palestinian question, over the next two decades.

The premises

On the Arab scene, independent Tunisia represented an important partner for the West in the context of the bipolar confrontation, thanks also to its moderate political stance on the Middle East question. Since independence, the foreign policy directed by Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba was characterized by the strengthening of ties with the Western bloc through its special relationship with the US, and the acquisition of a political role within the Arab world.² Bourguiba's ultimate goal was to represent a *trait d'union* between the Arab world and the Western bloc, thanks to his moderate position within the Arab League also with regard to the Middle East question. Indeed, his approach to the question was in strong contrast to the Egyptian approach. This diverse approach ensured the strengthening of Tunisian's relationship with its Western allies. The clash between Bourguiba and Nasser within the Arab League and the position vis-à-vis the Libyan leader Gaddafi, further strengthened Tunisia's role in the eyes of Washington and its Western European partners (De Leo, 2024).

From the very beginning of the Middle East question, under Bourguiba, Tunisia took a realistic and pragmatic attitude, distinguishing itself in particular from Egypt and Syria³ (Bahri, 1966). Bourguiba was convinced that a solution to the conflict with Israel could only be achieved through a step-by-step policy. Unlike Nasser, the Tunisian leader believed that the Palestinian problem had to be solved within territorial borders and through the instrument of diplomacy, starting with the recognition of Israel (Bessis & Belhassen, 2012, pp. 304-305). This did not mean betraying the Palestinian cause, but rather admitting that only through mutual recognition could the creation of the Palestinian state be achieved. According to the *Combattant Suprême*, the role of Arab leaders was to remain limited to material and moral support for Palestine, thus excluding their direct intervention (Hachemi Abbes, 2014, p. 267).

In March 1965, during a visit to the Jericho refugee camp, without mincing words, Bourguiba claimed that the policy of the neighboring Arab countries had only led to sterile hatred, the Arab countries, with an implicit reference to Nasser, had acted without lucidity (Chneguir, 2004, p. 101). In practice, the responsibility for the situation in which the Palestinians lived lay not only on Israeli but also on Arab states. Bourguiba's plan for Palestine therefore consisted of recognizing Israel and accepting the UN Recommendations, specifically No.181 of 1947 and No.194 of 1948. The Jericho speech, with its open criticism of the policy pursued by Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria, had important repercussions in the relationship between Tunis and the Arab world, forcing Tunisia into temporary isolation within the Arab League. Nasser reacted to Bourguiba's words by inflaming the Arab people against Tunisia,

¹ Literature on the Tunisian position on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian issue is dated cf. Merlin (1968) and Bilinsky (1973).

² On Tunisia's foreign policy during the presidency of Habib Bourguiba, among others, see Chneguir (2004). On relations between Tunisia and the United States, among others, see Ait-Chaalal (2004). On relations with France after independence cf. Bozo (2019).

³ On the positions adopted within the Maghreb regarding the Arab-Israeli issue, see Bahri (1966).

accused of betraying the Palestinian cause and the values common to the Arab world with respect to the conflict with Israel. The protests started from Egypt, where the Tunisian Embassy in Cairo was burnt down, and spread to the whole Middle East, including Syria and Lebanon (Merlin, 1968).

While Bourguiba's plan for Palestine was violently rejected by the Arabs, it went down no better with the Israelis. Tel Aviv's reaction was one of distrust and skepticism. After all, the Tunisian president himself had on several occasions attacked Israel, speaking of 'Israeli colonialism' for example during meetings of the Organization of African Unity, and, at the UN, Bourguiba had gone so far as to put Nazis and Israelis on the same level (Merlin, 1968). Beyond these aspects and the various reactions in Israel, no one in Tel Aviv was in favor of returning to the 1947 borders (Laskier, 2004, pp. 192 ss.; Abadi, 2017, pp. 511-512).

All this contributed to isolating Bourguiba from the Arab context, while he gained support across the Atlantic and north of Tunis. After the recognition of Israel by West Germany and the opening of diplomatic relations, Egypt demanded that the member states of the Arab League break off diplomatic relations with Bonn (Scarano, 2023). Here again, Bourguiba opposed Nasser, thus amplifying the contrasts even further. On balance, Bourguiba argued, the Soviet Union also had diplomatic relations with Israel and no one, least of all Nasser, had raised the issue of breaking off diplomatic relations with Moscow. Of course, the imminent opening of negotiations with the European Economic Community (EEC) for an association agreement also weighed on Bonn's position.⁴ The moderate position of Tunisian politics also with regard to the Middle East question would soon favor not only dialogue with the US but also dialogue with the EEC (De Leo, 2023).

The effects of the six-day war in Tunisia temporarily risked compromising the country's image as a stable country in the eyes of the West and in particular of Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, which saw Tunisia as a strategic partner for its Arab and Mediterranean policy (Lerner, 2011; Tosone, 2018).

The June 1967 war had sparked off a violent protest movement in Tunisia against Israel and the US (Melfa, 2010). Bourguiba had to run for cover, safeguarding the image of a stable and moderate country in the eyes of the West, appeasing Washington and the Jewish community: Bourguiba sent his son Bourguiba Jr. to America, while Badi Ladgham went to the synagogue in Tunis to meet the rabbi (Bessis & Belhassen, 2012, pp. 317 ss.).

It was clear that the 1967 war also represented a significant watershed for the Tunisian government, significantly affecting Bourguiba's position with respect to regional and international dynamics.⁵ Having weathered the storm of 1967, Tunisia strengthened its relations with its western partners, not least thanks to the signing of the association agreement with the EEC in 1969. At the same time, it also seemed time to mend the rift with the Arab world. In June 1970, the arrival at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Muhammad Masmoudi ensured Tunisia's political rehabilitation in the Arab League and in general his political action ensured good relations with the Arab world (Masmoudi, 1977). While keeping his distance from the radically anti-Israeli line still dominant within the Arab League, Masmoudi condemned Israeli actions and expansion into the Palestinian territories.⁶ Finally, trust in Tunisia was restored within the Arab League by entrusting the Tunisian Prime

⁴ *Ambassadeur de Tunisie auprès de la Communauté économique européenne. (23 mars 1965). Entretien avec M. Jean Rey: négociations Tunisie – CEE, position de la Tunisie dans la crise Bonn-Le Caire [Lettre]. Archives Nationales de Tunisie, Fond Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Versement 33/2012, Communauté économique européenne, b. 1.*

⁵ On the consequences of the Six-Day War, among others, see Dine (2004), Laron (2018), Oren (2002) and Segev (2008).

⁶ On Israeli territorial expansion, Tunisia always maintained a firm line of opposition, causing tensions with Israel especially after the arrival of Likud in the 1970s. See Abadi (2017).

Minister, Ladgham, with the chairmanship of the Arab High Committee after the Black September crisis in September 1970. Tunisia became responsible for the transfer of Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership from Amman to Beirut (Haouat, 2020, pp. 99 ss.). The Jordanian crisis and the death of Nasser in the same days left room for Bourguiba, who decided to use it to his advantage. It was Jordan's turn to be severely criticized for its demands concerning the Palestinian people and territories.⁷

In terms of relations with the US, the new Tunisian foreign minister, while recognizing Washington's importance in providing, albeit decreasing, economic assistance to Tunis, maintained a critical stance towards US support for Tel Aviv (US Department of State, 1970).⁸ Despite US fears regarding Masmoudi's foreign policy, Tunisia's membership of the western camp was never questioned, as the meetings between the Tunisian foreign minister and the Nixon administration demonstrated (Quandt, 2001; Logevall & Preston, 2008). In fact, on the first of October 1971, in a meeting with Secretary of State, William Pierce Rogers, Masmoudi leaked the news that the front of Arab countries hostile to Israel "are talking about reducing the flow of oil and are preparing for war", showing the reliability of Tunis in the eyes of the Nixon administration (US Department of State, 1971).

After the Six-Day War, the international context around the Middle East question changed (Lazarowitz, 2008; Jackson, 2020). The US choice starting with the Johnson administration to make Israel a strategic partner of American interests in the Middle East allowed the Soviet Union to open up spaces in the Arab world, contributing to the polarization of the issue (Cohen, 1995). By the second half of 1971, the People's Republic of China (China) had also decided to insert itself into the Mediterranean, playing the role of defender of nation states from the superpower game. In addition, Peking developed an interest in the Middle East question by supporting the Palestinians against Israel (She, 2020). Although Tunisia was not in the group of intransigents within the Arab League, it continued to maintain relations with Moscow and left an open door to Peking. Tunisia's non-alignment gave it the opportunity to take advantage of both Soviet aid and the extremely limited but politically relevant aid of China in particular from 1972 onwards; an albeit small presence in relation to cooperation with the West that Tunis also tried to exploit in order to obtain more aid from the West (Zoubir, 1987, pp. 399 ss.; Olimat, 2014; Eisenman, 2018; le Pere, 2015, pp. 359-385).

Finally, the Yom Kippur War was an opportunity for Tunisia to show its loyalty to the US once again by keeping its ports open and allowing access to an important logistical location in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Kissinger's strategy on the Middle East did not seem to lead to a strengthening of cooperation between Washington and Tunis; the US administration preferred to maintain a low-profile policy in North Africa (Valdevit, 1992, pp. 154 ss.; Khalil, 2016; Stocker, 2016; Ben-Ephraim, 2021). Kissinger also did not accept the Tunisian request for political recognition in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁹

On these premises, the 1970s saw Tunisia playing a leading role in the Middle East question by the end of the decade.

⁷ On Bourguiba's views on Jordanian aims in Palestine, see: Monsieur Bourguiba interview sur le Moyen Orient, 17 juillet 1973 <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/caf97048423/monsieur-bourguiba-interview-sur-le-moyen-orient>.

⁸ The US was concerned not only about the rapprochement with the Arab world but also about Masmoudi's rapprochement with North Vietnam. There was also the possibility that Tunis would recognize the German Democratic Republic.

⁹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (7 novembre 1973). *Conversation avec M. Masmoudi, escale de M. Kissinger à Tunis, Télégramme n° 888/892, diffusion réservée* [Télégramme]. Fond Afrique du Nord et Moyen-Orient (hereafter ANMO), Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 567. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, France.

Tunisia to the test: from dialogue with the Europeans to conquering the Arab League

By the early 1970s, Tunisia had become the border between two poles created around the Middle East question. Not only the US, but also the member states of the EEC began to share this view as early as the late 1960s, looking at the Maghreb country as a trading but also political partner (Guasconi, 2020; Laschi, 2016).

After the launch of the comprehensive Mediterranean policy and the Euro-Arab dialogue, co-operation with the EEC would become an instrument through which Bourguiba could find more political space within the Arab League and become that much desired *trait d'union*.

Ever since the preparation of the Copenhagen meeting between EEC member states and a delegation of four Arab League states including Tunisia, Masmoudi and Bourguiba took an active part in the launch of the Euro-Arab dialogue (Jobert, 1974).¹⁰ The objective of the dialogue was, however, divergent: for the Europeans it was to open a table on the energy and oil issue, for the Arabs it was to obtain the support of the EEC on the Palestinian question (Labbate 2016). It was precisely because of this divergence that the dialogue did not achieve the objectives hoped for by both sides.

The first stalemate in the start of the dialogue concerned the participation of the PLO in the Arab League, as decreed in Rabat in October 1974 by the Arab organization. Arafat's involvement was not only necessary within the dialogue with the Europeans, but also a natural consequence of the international changes, which took place especially at the United Nations with the recognition of observer status to the PLO. The solution was found in the EEC through the so-called 'Dublin Compromise', providing for the participation of the PLO in working groups of experts but not in those of state delegates (Labbate, 2016, pp. 67 ss.). During French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's visit to Tunis, Tunisia showed its support for the EEC formula, overcoming opposition within the Arab League.¹¹ The conclusion of the Cooperation Agreement between the EEC and Tunisia, which, among other things, established for the first time a line of financing from the Community to the Maghreb country, certainly played a role in this context, expanding cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Having launched the Euro-Arab dialogue in Luxembourg in May 1976, Tunis was preparing to take over the presidency of the Arab League on 1 January 1977 (Labbate, 2016). The second meeting of state delegates took place in Tunis from 10 to 12 February 1977 and was an opportunity for Tunisia to demonstrate its political capacity to seek conciliatory solutions and show itself to be a reliable partner for Europeans.¹² Tunisia recognized that active participation in the Euro-Arab dialogue would offer it a political role in the Middle East issue and economically allow it to diversify its sources of funding to support national economic development plans, turning to petrodollar-rich Arab countries.¹³

¹⁰ Michel Jobert, French Foreign Minister from 1973 to 1974, recalls the active role of the Tunisian summits in the preparation of the first Euro-Arab Conference in Copenhagen in his memoirs.

¹¹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (15 novembre 1975). *Compte rendu de la conversation entre le ministre et M. Chatty, ministre tunisien des Affaires Étrangères, au palais de Carthage le 6 novembre 1975* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 576. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, France.

¹² Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (14 février 1977). *La Tunisie et le Dialogue euro-arabe* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 576. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, France. Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (1977, 17 février). *Compte rendu de l'audience accordée par le Premier ministre à M. Chatty (le 16 février 1977)* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 576. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, France.

¹³ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (13 mai 1977). *La Tunisie et le dialogue euro-arabe* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 576. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, France. Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (18 mai 1978). *Politique étrangère* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 559. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, France.

In reality, the results of the Tunis meeting were not encouraging. Although political issues were given more space during this second meeting than the previous year, the Euro-Arab dialogue was at a dead end. In November, Egypt's president, Anwar al-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem triggered reactions from the Arab League member states. In Tunis, the Egyptian leader's choice was not interpreted negatively in its inspiring principle, as it went towards the normalization of relations that the Bourguiba plan had always considered necessary. It was condemned for the lack of concerted action at the regional level and for the more general lack of pro-Palestinian actions on the part of the Israeli government.¹⁴ The victory of Likud and the appointment of Menachem Begin as head of the Israeli government had shown that the restitution of the territories occupied in the 1967 war would be an unacceptable demand for Israel and that indeed there was a willingness to continue Israeli colonial expansion. Nevertheless, Tunisia once again maintained a moderate position, showing its Western partners its willingness to reach a shared solution on the issue (US Department of State, 1977).

The Camp David Talks in 1978 aggravated Egypt's position within the Arab League. At the Arab League meeting in Baghdad on 5 November 1978, Egypt was condemned for its position, anticipating its expulsion from the organization (Labbate, 2016). On this occasion also, Tunisia maintained a cautious attitude so as not to damage its relations with the Arab countries and in particular with Algeria, with which it was seeking an alliance in an anti-Gaddafi stance. During the meeting held in Washington at the end of November, the Tunisian government informed the Carter administration of what had happened in Baghdad, reassuring the ally of its loyalty (US Department of State, 1978).

For the US, moderation and stability in Tunisia remained important in order to resolve the Palestinian question and decrease polarization around the issue, also in view of Gaddafi's aggressive policy, which had intensified since 1978, towards the Bourguiba regime (Nemchenok, 2009; Jensehaugen, 2014).

The signing of the peace treaty of 26 March 1979 between Cairo and Tel Aviv worsened the political framework of relations within the Euro-Arab dialogue. The EEC supported the peace agreement, while the members of the Arab League sanctioned the expulsion of Egypt.

Tunisia's position with regard to the Middle East question became an important factor for future relations within the Arab League for the Western allies. Bourguiba had always relied on diplomacy as a weapon to resolve the dispute, and recognized the necessary presence of the PLO at the negotiations, not within the Egyptian or Jordanian delegation as proposed by the United States; for this reason, he aimed to preserve an open channel of communication with Moscow, which not only supported the PLO's initiatives but also expressed alignment with the Tunisian proposals (US Department of State, 1979a).¹⁵

Tunisia took care to maintain good relations with Cairo, despite the difficulties and Egypt's rigid stance in the face of Arab League positions.¹⁶ In April 1979, however, Egypt and Tunisia broke off diplomatic relations, but did not break off contact between the two governments.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (10 janvier 1978,). *Verbatim de l'entretien entre le premier ministre et M. Nouira le 10 janvier 1978 à 12h30* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 577. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

¹⁵ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (14 avril 1977). *Visite de M. Nouira en U.R.S.S., Dépêche, Moscou* [Telegram]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 566. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

¹⁶ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (9 avril 1979). *Siège de la Ligue Arabe, Télégramme n. 753/57, Le Caire* [Telegram]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 563. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

¹⁷ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (13 juin 1979). *Réunion de la Conférence de boycott d'Israël, Dépêche, Tunis* [Report]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 563. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

On 27-28 June, at the extraordinary session of the Arab League, the Tunisian politician Chedli Klibi was elected Secretary General, inaugurating ‘l’esprit de Tunis’ within the Arab organization; management of the League under the banner of realism, effectiveness and pragmatism.¹⁸ Tunisia’s candidature was also supported by the PLO, which believed it could exploit Tunis’s international position, also in view of the evolution in European and US public opinion towards the Palestinian problem.¹⁹ A few days earlier, the Tunisian Prime Minister had reassured Washington about its new role within the Arab League (US Department of State, 1979b).

In Klibi’s first speech, the new secretary paid tribute to the work “des frères égyptiens dans l’organisation de la Ligue arabe”, expressing the hope that “la séparation avec ce peuple ne durerait pas longtemps”, clearly indicating that “l’Olp (...) seule représente le peuple palestinien”.²⁰ Finally, he launched an appeal to the Jewish community to affirm support “à toute entreprises de lutte contre la discrimination raciale et l’intolérance religieuse”.²¹

In general, Tunis’ choice was a tribute to the country’s policy and its moderation, which had maintained a bridging position between the different factions of the Arab world and the United States. Moreover, this new role, according to Tunis, protected it from possible military attacks from Libya.²² The Arab League’s move to Tunis, however, placed the EEC in an ambiguous position, because if it had continued the dialogue with Tunis, it would in fact have endorsed, albeit indirectly, the Egyptian expulsion option.²³

In the same year that Tunisia acquired the leadership in the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation also bestowed an important recognition on it: the appointment of Habib Chatty, former foreign minister, as secretary-general. Thus, Tunisia was officially recognized for its political importance in the Arab-Muslim world. The US asked Tunis not to isolate Egypt also from the Islamic organization (US Department of State, 1979c, 1979d). Nonetheless, it was clear to all parties to the Euro-Arab dialogue that the situation created with Egypt and the maintenance of two Arab League headquarters, because Cairo had not recognized the move to Tunis, would not further the dialogue. For the European Group of Nine, the possible solution was to reopen the dialogue through contacts with Klibi by the EEC presidency and to keep the Egyptians informed of developments at all times, hiding it from the Tunisians.²⁴

¹⁸ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (6 juillet 1979). *Conseil extraordinaire de la Ligue arabe (Tunis 27/28 juin 1979)*, Dépêche, Tunis [Report]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 563. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

¹⁹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (17 septembre 1979). *Conférence de presse de M. Abou Mazen*, Dépêche, Tunis [Press release]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 562. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²⁰ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (27 juillet 1979). *Visite au Liban du Nouveau Secrétaire Général de la Ligue arabe* [Dépêche]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 562. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²¹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (2 juillet 1979). *Conseil de la Ligue. Discours de M. Chedli Klibi* [Dépêche]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 563. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²² Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (11 juin 1979). *Politique étrangère de la Tunisie* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 559. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²³ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (6 avril 1979). *Transfert du Siège de la Ligue arabe* [Télégramme n. 426-29]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 563. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²⁴ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (19 novembre 1979). *Réunion ministérielle de coopération politique: Dialogue euro-arabe* [Note]. Fond Europe, Série Communauté économique européenne 1929Inva (hereafter CE, 1929Inva), b. 4151. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

Although PLO participation in the dialogue with the EEC was out of place for the Europeans, the energy crisis and sanctions on Tehran prompted the Europeans to resume the dialogue and turn to Tunis despite Egyptian protests.²⁵ The time seemed ripe for a political breakthrough in the dialogue after the Venice Declaration, but it still lacked PLO recognition, which was not satisfactory to the Arabs (Allen & Hauri, 2010, pp. 94 ss.).

The decision of the four EEC member states (France, Italy, the Netherlands and Britain) to participate in the Sinai Mission again blocked progress on dialogue. Participation in the Sinai forces provoked negative reactions within the Arab League, and a few months later, the trip of French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson to Israel provoked outrage from Arab countries. On the latter event, Tunis kept a low profile while criticizing French actions.²⁶

The inaction of the international community with respect to Israel's continued violations, not only with Operation Babylon in Iraq, but also in Lebanon with Operation Litany and in the occupied territories, was leading the moderate countries of the Arab League toward the group of intransigents.²⁷

Tunis tried to keep a channel open with the European allies while waiting for better times within the Arab organization. By now, however, most Arab League members no longer considered European initiatives worthwhile.

The risk of a new Beirut in the Maghreb

The 1980s opened with two important events: elections in the US and Israel. The victory of Ronald Reagan and Menachem Begin imposed a return to political polarization around the Middle East issue, giving rise to tension with the Soviet Union, and new elements and new actors were added, such as Iran and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in its various forms (Khalidi, 1999; Citino, 2019; Andersson & Waage, 2020).

In Israel, Begin's reappointment in 1981 strengthened Israeli security policy, thanks to US support (Tal, 2023).

This new political framework posed reflections for Tunisia. The opportunity to understand the intentions of the new US administration came with the first official visit of Muhammad Mzali, Tunisia's prime minister, to Washington from April 19-26, 1982. Mzali once again had to replace Bourguiba, who was in poor health. The meeting between Mzali and Reagan was an opportunity to strengthen the bond between the two countries; the moment seemed

Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (11 décembre 1979). Coreu CPE/MUL/ETR 4117, 91ème réunion du comité politique (Dublin les 10 et 11 décembre 1979) - projet de relèvement de Conclusions [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 552. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²⁵ Tunisia had voted favorably, occupying the Security Council seat since January 1980, to sanctions on Iran. Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (10 janvier 1980). *Vote tunisien en faveur de sanctions contre l'Iran* [Note pour le Cabinet du ministre]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 564. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (26 février 1980). *Dialogue euro-arabe* [Télégramme n. 233]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 561. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²⁶ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (11 décembre 1981). *Réactions arabes au voyage du Ministre en Israël* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 564. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (14 décembre 1981). *Entretien avec l'ambassadeur de Tunisie* [Note]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 581. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

²⁷ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères français. (22 juillet 1981). *La Ligue arabe en juin 1981* [Synthèse politique, Dépêche]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 41Sup, b. 562. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

favorable to ask for more support from the US, given the rekindling of antagonism with the Soviet Union.²⁸ The purpose of the visit for the US administration was to reaffirm

our traditional friendship for Tunisia and President Bourguiba [...] our support for Tunisia's economic, social and political development [...], our support for Tunisia's security, [...] [to] encourage Tunisia to continue working for moderation in the Arab-Israel imbroglio [...].²⁹

Tunisia had also demonstrated a moderate and supportive stance to Washington's intentions at the United Nations, such as supporting the call for condemnation of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Therefore, it was necessary to continue to encourage Tunisia in its work of moderation in the Arab Israeli conflict (US Department of State, 1982a). The new administration did not intend to change the alliance with Tunisia, even in an anti-Libyan capacity, by providing economic and military support. The Reagan administration, therefore, began tying Tunisian security to the fight against terrorism and the confrontation with Libya, especially after the 1980 coup attempt against the regime of staunch ally Bourguiba (Little, 2012; Soave, 2017).

The first challenge the Reagan administration faced in the Middle East was in Lebanon, which had become one of the targets of Israeli security policy. In June 1982, the Israeli Defense Force launched Operation Peace in Galilee with the goal of clearing Lebanon of the presence of Palestinian fedayeen (Di Peri, 2021). Arab League member states called for unanimous condemnation by the international community of Israeli actions and a restoration of the situation in the cedar country.³⁰ The US decided to intervene to negotiate a disengagement agreement, deploying a multinational force along with France and Italy,³¹ however, with little result (Labbate, 2022). Thus, on August 25, the multinational force found itself having to evacuate the PLO leadership team from Lebanon. Tunisia, the headquarters of the Arab League, became the PLO headquarters, while some of its members were transferred to Jordan, Iraq and South Yemen.

Tunisia in August 1982 was very exposed: on one side there was Libya, which actively supported opposition movements against President Bourguiba; on the other, the arrival of the PLO leadership group in Tunis. A security exposure also recorded by the US Embassy in Tunisia (US Department of State, 1982b).

While the West failed to formulate a shared peace proposal, the Arab states decided to come forward (Aruri & Moughrabi, 1983; Fraser, 2015). The peace proposal was approved at the Arab League summit in Fez on September 6-9, 1982. The Fahd Plan, named after the Saudi king, Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, provided for Israel's withdrawal from all Arab territory occupied in 1967, including the Arab part of Jerusalem; the dismantling of Israeli settlements built on Arab land after 1967, including those in Jerusalem; the guarantee of freedom of

²⁸ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. (1982, May 25). *Letter from Ronald Reagan to Habib Bourguiba*. Executive Secretariat NSC, Head of State: Records, Tunisia: President Bourguiba 8203353-8204893, Box 34. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, United States.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. (1982, May 25). *Letter from Ronald Reagan to Mohamed Mzali*. Executive Secretariat NSC, Head of State: Records, Tunisia: President Bourguiba 8203353-8204893, Box 34. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, United States.

²⁹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. (1982, April 29). *Meeting with Tunisian Prime Minister Mzali* [Note]. Executive Secretariat NSC, Country File: Records, Tunisia (04/28/1982-04/29/1982), Box 4. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, United States.

³⁰ On December 14, 1981, the Knesset had voted for the *de facto* annexation of Syria's Golan Heights. This event hinted that the Israeli expansion policy would not stop. See Fraser (2015).

³¹ On Italian foreign policy in the Middle East issue, among others, see Riccardi (2013). On the French position, see Filu (2005).

worship for all religions in the Holy Places; affirmation of the right of the Palestinian Arab people to return to their homes and compensation for those who did not wish to return; independence for the West Bank and Gaza Strip after a transitional period monitored by the United Nations; and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Guarantors of the agreement would be the United Nations or its member states, which would ensure the implementation of these provisions. The novelty of the Plan compared to its past counterparts was the recognition to all states in the region, including Israel, that they could live in peace.³² It was a success for Bourguiba, as the Arabs recognized Israel's right to exist, albeit through an unspoken formula. Seventeen years after the Jericho speech, Bourguiba's policy proposal had found useful space for its discussion and potential application, and this also indirectly constituted a recognition of the role that Tunisia had exercised until then within the Arab world and the international credit it had won.³³

After the Fahd Plan was drafted, Bourguiba began to look to the West for interlocutors favorable to its endorsement at the United Nations.³⁴ The first contact was with the French president, François Mitterrand, who met Bourguiba for the first time in Paris in September 1982 (Vedrine, 1996). During the meeting, the two heads of state renewed their political closeness especially in relation to Lebanon, and Tunisia pushed for French support in the Security Council for the Fahd Plan.³⁵ A month later, Cheysson's visit to Tunis and meeting with Arafat was an opportunity for France to realign itself to a pro-Arab position, particularly after the tragic events at the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.³⁶ The Sabra and Chatila massacre shook the international community profoundly and led Bourguiba to call for stronger action by the US and the multinational force (US Department of State, 1982c).

As US intelligence services repeatedly pointed out, the political role Bourguiba had won for himself, however, was not without risk to his country (Bessis & Belhassen, 2012, p. 471). In August 1984, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) warned of Tunisian instability and the risk of losing a loyal partner located geographically 140 km from the NATO base at Sigonella in Sicily. Problems leading to instability in the country included economic and social issues, the problem of succession to Bourguiba, and the risk of an advance of Islamic forces in power. According to the report, despite Mzali's efforts, growing discontent among the young

³² Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (4 septembre 1982). *Rencontre à Tunis avec M. Arafat (Télégramme n° 816)* [Télégramme diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 4. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (29 novembre 1982). *Politique étrangère de la Tunisie* [Note diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 2. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

³³ Ambassade de France en Tunisie. (10 septembre 1982). *Bourguiba 1982 – Regain ou déclin ? (Télégramme n° 836)* [Télégramme diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 2. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (29 septembre 1982). *Politique étrangère de la Tunisie* [Note diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 2. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

³⁴ Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (30 septembre 1982). *Entretien du Président de la République avec le Président Bourguiba* [Note diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 2. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

³⁵ Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (30 septembre 1982). *Entretien du Président de la République avec le Président Bourguiba* [Note diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 2. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

³⁶ Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (13 octobre 1982). *Conférence de presse de M. Claude Cheysson à Tunis* [Télégramme diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 4. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

Ministère des Affaires étrangères français. (15 octobre 1982). *La presse tunisienne après la visite du Ministre (Télégramme n° 969)* [Télégramme diplomatique]. Fond ANMO, Série Tunisie 27Qont, b. 4. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve, La Courneuve, Paris, France.

and unemployed and rising poverty in both rural and urban areas were causing support for the Islamic movement to grow. The report also expressed fears that anti-Western instances might be emerging in Tunisia due to US support for Israeli policy in the Middle East. Tunisian public opinion did not broadly support the government's anchorage in Washington, given the poor developments in the Arab-Israeli issue.³⁷ Once again, Bourguiba turned to the US for backing, and then paid an official visit in June 1985 to ask the ally for economic and military support. On the eve of the meeting, a new CIA report described the situation in the country and warned the Reagan administration of the risks that succession to Bourguiba would pose to US policy in the Mediterranean. The issue of the country's leadership succession was, therefore, being followed closely by Washington, so much so that it was speculated that "a military-controlled government could emerge under certain conditions".³⁸ The most obvious risks, according to the report, involved potential Islamist drift and external intervention by the Tripoli government, as well as possible communist drift. The country's economic prospects, then, not very encouraging for the rest of the decade, made the picture even more worrisome. Behind the Arab League's move to Tunis, moreover, was the risk of an uncoupling of Tunisian society from secular values in the direction of greater Arabization of the country.

A few months after Bourguiba's meeting with Reagan, the Israeli raid on the PLO headquarters in Tunis put US-Tunisia relations in crisis (Joffe, 1987).

The October 1, 1985 event was also an opportunity to test Bourguiba's political skills against his new international role. The Israeli bombing resulted in a death toll of 72, 12 of whom were Tunisians (Kasar, 2005). Bourguiba protested strongly against Israel but especially against the US (US Department of State, 1985). Reagan did not condemn the Israeli action, indeed publicly the US president called it legitimate. In June in his meeting with Bourguiba, Reagan had guaranteed protection to Tunisia against Libya, a few months later, however, Tunisia understood the limits of that guarantee. The Israeli raid on Tunis was immediately condemned by the entire international community, including European states (Ravenel 1985). While the latter, however, did not also point the finger at the US, the Arab states instead openly accused Washington of supporting Israel as well.³⁹

The Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, in a message to Washington condemned the Israeli action because it endangered the survival of Arafat, who among the PLO leaders was the one who most realistically could have led to peace talks.⁴⁰

Relations between Washington and Tunis suffered as a result of the Israeli bombing, Bourguiba went so far as to threaten the severance of diplomatic relations if the US vetoed Tunisia's request for condemnation of Israel in the Security Council. The international

³⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. (1984, August). *Tunisia: Moving toward crisis: An intelligence assessment* General CIA Records: FOIA Collection [Intelligence report]. CIA-RDP85T00287R001301600001-2. Central Intelligence Agency Library. Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/>

Central Intelligence Agency. (1984, May 23). *Tunisia: More troubles ahead* General CIA Records: FOIA Collection [Intelligence report]. CIA-RDP85T00314R000200120002-6. Central Intelligence Agency Library. Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/>

³⁸ Central Intelligence Agency. (1985, June 11). *Tunisia on the eve of President Bourguiba's visit to Washington* General CIA Records: FOIA Collection [Intelligence report]. CIA-RDP87T00126R001101570007-8. Central Intelligence Agency Library. Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/>

³⁹ To compare all incoming telegrams to the Secretary of State in Washington from the various US Embassies (Amman, Cairo, Riyadh, Brussels, Rome, Paris), in Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. (1983–1989). NSC: Records, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, Israeli airstrike on PLO camps in Tunisia. Box 6. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, United States.

⁴⁰ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. (1985, October 1). *Egypt: President Mubarak comments on Israeli raid on Tunisia* [Report]. NSC: Records, 1983–1989, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, Israeli Airstrike on PLO Camps in Tunisia, Box 6. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, United States.

climate around the US suggested diminishing support for Israel in order not to lose allies in the Arab world. Thus, at the United Nations Tunisia achieved a victory: the US abstention in the Security Council and the condemnation of Israel (Bessis & Belhassen, 2012, pp. 485-487).

The hijacking of the Achille Lauro a few weeks later and the possible presence of Palestinian commando members who had departed from Tunis put Tunisia in trouble and made the PLO presence too complicated to be handled without risk to the Tunisian regime's hold and its relations with friendly and allied countries. Tensions between Bourguiba and the PLO grew greater and greater. Tunisia realized that the PLO's presence was beginning to damage it, as well as fueling movements of protest and opposition to the regime. Thus, beginning in the second half of 1985, the presence of the Palestinian leadership was reduced. Palestinians began to have difficulty obtaining Tunisian visas, the PLO had to relocate some institutions to Iraq, Sudan and Yemen. Tunisian government surveillance of Palestinians increased and intensified.

In addition, Bourguiba decided to act domestically as well, increasing repression of opposition through the appointment in 1986 of General Zine al-'Abidine ben 'Ali as interior minister. The new minister operated with the goal of recovering social and political stability and international trust. During a meeting with the US ambassador in Tunis, ben 'Ali guaranteed a reduction in the PLO presence and a freeze on the movement of Palestinian leaders in and out of the country (US Department of State, 1986).

Ben 'Ali 's arrival appeased the US, which was concerned about the future of pro-Western Tunisia. In a 1986 report, the CIA stated that "Bourguiba's increasing infirmity and capricious behavior" posed a risk to the country's future stability and to Western interests in the Mediterranean. Among future prospects, it claimed, "General Ben Ali is best placed to assume a national leadership role because of his wide-ranging control over the security and intelligence network".⁴¹

It was a sign of a change that heralded a period of transformation within the Bourguiba regime, which had now become an obstacle to US and generally, Western, interests in the Middle East area.⁴²

Conclusion

Bourguiba's Tunisia succeeded in its goal of becoming a bridge between the Arab world and the West on the Middle East question, assuming an important mediating role thanks to the international reputation it had acquired over the years. Beginning in 1979, winning the leadership of the Arab organization, which was joined in the same year by the Islamic organization, inaugurated a new political season in the Maghrebi country. In 1982, the relocation of the PLO to Tunis restored that much-coveted leading position in the Palestinian question to President Bourguiba. The Bourguiba plan for Palestine, expressed in 1965 in Jericho, found official recognition within the Fahd Plan approved in 1982 by the Arab League. An ambitious Plan that for the first time posited recognition of Israel as possible.

Despite Bourguiba's successes and the international political prestige he gained between the 1970s and 1980s, his new role as mediator in the issue was not without domestic political

⁴¹ Central Intelligence Agency. (1986, January 31). *Tunisia: Politicization of the military*. General CIA Records: FOIA Collection [Intelligence report]. CIA-RDP86T01017R000201860001-3. Central Intelligence Agency Library. Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/>

Central Intelligence Agency. (1986, August). *Prospects for Tunisia: National Intelligence Estimate (NIE-63-84)*. General CIA Records: FOIA Collection [Intelligence report]. CIA-RDP87T00126R001101570007-8. Central Intelligence Agency Library. Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/>

⁴² For a comprehensive reinterpretation of Tunisia's position over the long term, including during the Ben Ali presidency, see Ghiles-Meilhac (2014) and Petrucci and Fois (2016).

consequences. The Israeli bombing of Tunis in 1985 was destabilizing for the Bourguiba regime. The risk of a new Beirut in the Maghreb became real. The presence of the PLO became unwieldy for a country already going through an economic and social crisis that threatened the stability of the Bourguiba regime. Up to that point, the West had approved the new course of Tunisian foreign policy, certain of the reliability of its partner, but after 1985 the risk of an Islamist drift in the country became an element of concern. The repression of opposition and the reduction of the Palestinian presence in the country were the goals of General ben 'Ali, who in less than two years ferried the country to a new political regime. In the end, that role as mediator between the Arab and Western worlds, but more importantly, that of becoming a major player in the Middle East issue, like a boomerang, became one of the reasons for the end of the Bourguiba regime.

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