



Les documents sont reproduits à l'issue de cette présentation.

TuniLeaks, les documents dévoilés par Wikileaks concernant la Tunisie : Quelques réactions à chaud.

Nawaat relaye, en exclusivité, une partie des documents secrets qui concernent la Tunisie dévoilés par Wikileaks. Le site qui a déjà été à l'origine de la fuite de milliers de documents sur l'engagement américain en Irak et en Afghanistan. Les documents sont issus du réseau SIPRNet (Secret Internet Protocol Router Network) de l'administration américaine utilisé pour la transmission de mémos diplomatiques et autres documents secrets. Tous les documents relatifs à la Tunisie sont classés secrets : (*Classification SECRET//NOFORN*). « *Nofor* », qui est une restriction supplémentaire, signifie « *Not releasable to Foreign Nationals* », autrement dit « *non diffusable aux étrangers* ».

Cette première partie, que nous avons nommée *TuniLeaks*, est composée de **17** 20 documents qui révèlent la teneur des échanges entre l'ambassade US en Tunisie et le département d'Etat américain. Lesdits rapports sont relativement récents et ont été transmis entre le **28-Mai-2008** 3 Mars 2008 et le 9 février 2010. Parmi les **17** 20 rapports, 2 sont rédigés par l'actuel ambassadeur des Etats-Unis d'Amérique à Tunis Gordon Gray, et **15** 18 par son prédécesseur. Cette première partie de câbles diplomatiques entre l'ambassade US à Tunis et Washington sera suivie par d'autres parties que nous publierons au fur et à mesure.

Il est important ici de signaler qu'il s'agit donc des câbles du pouvoir civil par opposition aux instances militaires. Pour le cas des documents auxquels nous avons eu accès, en l'occurrence ceux concernant la Tunisie, il est frappant de relever la place des préoccupations américaines relatives aux droits de l'Homme. Ce qui pour nous a été une surprise, d'autant plus qu'il ne s'agit pas de communiqués publics destinés à calmer des ONG, mais des échanges privés entre des diplomates. Sans aucun doute, l'ensemble des documents mis en ligne par Wikileaks révélera-t-il, s'agissant d'autres pays, des éléments qui heurtent des principes de droit de l'Homme. Mais pour le cas de la Tunisie, cela ne semble pas avoir été le cas au sein des documents dont nous avons disposés.

Nos premières appréciations sur le contenu sont des appréciations à chaud. Mais nous aurons l'occasion de revenir dessus après plusieurs lectures approfondies, seules à même de permettre de saisir des détails qui pourraient sembler anodins à première vue.

Il serait trop long de revenir sur tous les éléments évoqués par ces documents dans cette présentation. Néanmoins, nous avons retenu quelques aspects qui ont accroché les membres de l'équipe de Nawaat, notamment les préoccupations américaines relatives aux droits de l'Homme (I), la perception des US de la pratique du pouvoir en Tunisie (II), le profil de certaines personnalités (III) et l'aspect troublant de quelques éléments dont on ne trouve quasiment pas de traces dans ces mêmes documents (IV).

I. - Les préoccupations américaines des questions relatives aux droits de l'Homme

C'est sans doute l'un des aspects les plus surprenants que l'on découvre au sein de ces documents. Tant et si bien, qu'il n'est pas exagéré de dire que le premier bénéficiaire de cette fuite, ce sont les USA. D'où, d'ailleurs, le fait d'envisager toutes les éventualités concernant l'origine de la fuite.

Sur Nawaat, nous ne nous sommes jamais privés de dénoncer les connivences de l'administration américaine avec les responsables Tunisiens et (Arabes en général) en matière de violation des droits de l'Homme. Or, ces documents montrent que les choses ne sont pas aussi simples et que leur souci quant au respect des droits de l'Homme en Tunisie est réel, tout comme les pressions diplomatiques en ce sens. Si en de nombreux endroits, il est question de conditionner certaines aides au regard des avancés en terme de libéralisation politique, les choses deviennent surprenantes quand on lit qu'il est même envisagé de reconsidérer les aides militaires par rapport à ce critère.

En briefant le secrétaire d'Etat lors d'une visite en Tunisie, l'ambassade indique:

« Dans nos contacts avec les responsables tunisiens, ils [les Tunisiens] soulignent nos liens solides de plus de 200 ans. Mais ils ne dépassent rarement le cap du général vers le particulier. Votre visite est une occasion d'indiquer clairement qu'il est possible d'aller plus loin. Si la Tunisie est prête à s'ouvrir et à faire davantage sur les questions qui préoccupent les États-Unis, comme par exemple, les défis régionaux et/ou la libéralisation politique, nous sommes prêts à chercher des moyens d'approfondir nos relations. »

« In our contacts with Tunisian officials, they [Tunisians] emphasize our strong ties of over 200 years. But they rarely move from the general to the specific. Your visit is an opportunity to make clear that more is possible. If Tunisia is prepared to open up and do more on issues of concern to the United States, e.g., regional challenges and/or political liberalization, we are prepared to look for ways to deepen our relationship. » (VZCZCXRO1905 sec.18)

Sur un autre document, on découvre qu'il est même question de faire pression au niveau des partenaires européens pour faire avancer les choses sur ce terrain. Dans le document « VZCZCXRO0363, sec. 9 » on y apprend :

« Nous recommandons d'être explicite avec les dirigeants du gouvernement tunisien [GT] que nous changeons notre approche, tout en indiquant clairement que nous allons continuer à s'engager en privé avec les partis d'opposition et la société civile. En outre, nous devons accroître nos efforts pour convaincre nos partenaires européens, et d'autres pays aux vues similaires, à intensifier leurs efforts pour persuader le GT d'accélérer la réforme politique. Si certains membres de l'UE (par exemple l'Allemagne, le Royaume-Uni) sont d'accord avec nous, les grands pays comme la France et l'Italie ont hésité à faire pression sur le GT. Nous devons travailler à les amener à le faire, et à faire de ce sujet une condition pour les collaborations futures et pour l'accession au statut-avancées avec l'UE. »

« We recommend being explicit with Government Of Tunisia [GOT] leaders that we are changing our approach, while also making clear that we will continue to engage privately with opposition parties and civil society. In addition, we should increase our efforts to persuade our European partners, and other like-minded countries, to step up their efforts to persuade the GOT to accelerate political reform. While some in the EU (e.g., Germany, the UK) agree with us, key countries such as France and Italy have shied from putting pressure on the GOT. We should work to get them to do so, and to condition further assistance and advanced EU associate status on it. »

II. - L'image de Ben Ali et la perception de la pratique du pouvoir en Tunisie

On ne s'étonnera pas d'apprendre que la considération de la personne de Ben Ali est à la hauteur du caractère despotique de son pouvoir. Certains passages, notamment ceux du doc. VZCZCXRO0363 sont sans appel.

« Trop souvent, le gouvernement tunisien préfère l'illusion de l'engagement au travail sérieux pour une réelle coopération. Le changement majeur en Tunisie devra attendre le départ de Ben Ali, [...] La Tunisie a de gros problèmes. Le Président Ben Ali est vieillissant, son régime est sclérosé et il n'y a pas de successeur évident. De nombreux Tunisiens sont frustrés par le manque de libertés politiques et

éprouvent de la colère envers la famille présidentielle, la corruption, le chômage élevé et les inégalités régionales. L'extrémisme fait peser une menace permanente. [...] La Tunisie est un Etat policier, avec peu de liberté d'expression et d'association, et de graves problèmes de droits humains. [...] Pour chaque pas en avant, il y en a un autre en arrière, par exemple le récent rachat d'importants médias privés par des personnes proches du président Ben Ali.

[Ben Ali] et son régime ont perdu le contact avec le peuple tunisien. Ils ne tolèrent pas de conseils ou de critiques, nationales fussent-elles ou internationales. Ils s'appuient de plus en plus sur le contrôle par police et se concentre sur la préservation du pouvoir. La corruption dans les premiers cercles s'accroît. Même les Tunisiens moyens sont à présent très conscients de cela, et les voix de leurs plaintes s'amplifient [...]. Les Tunisiens vraiment n'aiment pas, voire éprouve de la haine envers la première dame Leila Trabelsi et sa famille. En privé, les opposants au régime se moquent d'elle. Même dans les cercles proches du pouvoir on y exprime la consternation face à ses frasques. Entre temps, la colère s'intensifie face au taux de chômage qui grimpe et les inégalités régionales. En conséquence, les risques pour la stabilité à long terme du régime sont en augmentation. »

« Too often, the Government Of Tunisia prefers the illusion of engagement to the hard work of real cooperation. Major change in Tunisia will have to wait for Ben Ali's departure, [...] Tunisia has big problems. President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor. Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom and angered by First Family corruption, high unemployment and regional inequities. Extremism poses a continuing threat. [...] Tunisia is a police state, with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems. [...] for every step forward there has been another back, for example the recent takeover of important private media outlets by individuals close to President Ben Ali.

[Ben Ali] and his regime have lost touch with the Tunisian people. They tolerate no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Increasingly, they rely on the police for control and focus on preserving power. And, corruption in the inner circle is growing. Even average Tunisians are now keenly aware of it, and the chorus of complaints is rising [...]. Tunisians intensely dislike, even hate, First Lady Leila Trabelsi and her family. In private, regime opponents mock her; even those close to the government express dismay at her reported behavior. Meanwhile, anger is growing at Tunisia's high unemployment and regional inequities. As a consequence, the

risks to the regime's long-term stability are increasing. » VZCZCXRO0363, sec.1, 6 et 7.

Et ailleurs, on y lit également :

« Il n'y a aucune chance pour que les élections soient libres et régulières. La liberté d'expression et la liberté d'association sont sévèrement limitées. Et on ne permet pas aux partis d'opposition indépendants de fonctionner effectivement. »

« There is no chance the elections will be free or fair; freedom of expression and freedom of association are severely constrained, and independent opposition parties are not allowed to operate effectively. » VZCZCXRO1905, sec.6

Par ailleurs, certains événements semblent avoir eu un impact particulièrement négatif sur l'appréciation du régime tunisien. L'épisode de la nomination d'une « *incompétente* » à la tête de la Banque de Tunisie (qui est au demeurant l'épouse de Abdelwaheb Abdallah) tout en débarquant le très compétent Faouzi Bel Kahia « un banquier très respecté qui a occupé le poste pendant 16 ans » (« *highly respected banker who held the post for 16 years* » VZCZCXRO4879) paraît avoir laissé de sérieuses traces. De même, la gestion catastrophique du « *problème* » fiscal de l'« *American Cooperative School of Tunis* » fut très préjudiciable aux intérêts nationaux. Les termes que l'on découvre dans le document VZCZCXRO0363 sec. 9, du 17 juillet 2009 sont très significatifs :

« Le plus troublant fut l'effort unilatéral et maladroit du gouvernement tunisien d'imposer de nouvelles taxes rétroactives à l'American cooperative School of Tunis. Il ne fait aucun doute que cette action a été à l'initiative d'amis puissants (y compris sans doute Leila Trabelsi) de l'Ecole Internationale de Carthage. Cela soulève d'importantes questions sur la gouvernance tunisienne et nos amitiés réciproques. Si, en fin de compte, les actions du GT obligent l'école à fermer, nous aurons besoin de réduire les effectifs de la Mission, limiter nos programmes et réduire nos relations. »

« Most troubling has been the [Government of Tunisia's] unilateral and clumsy effort to impose new and retroactive taxes on the American Cooperative School of Tunis. There is little doubt that this action was at the behest of powerful friends (probably including Leila Trabelsi) of the International School of Carthage. It raises important questions about Tunisian governance and our friendship. If, in the end, the GOT's actions

force the school to close we will need to downsize the Mission, limit our programs, and dial down our relations. »

Enfin, la gestion du rapatriement des anciens détenus Tunisiens de Guantanamo semble avoir été désastreuse de la part des Tunisiens. Le manquement à la parole donnée (au niveau des assurances tunisiennes quant au respect des droits fondamentaux des rapatriés) a particulièrement exaspéré les Américains.

III. - Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Kamel Morjane et Sakhr el Matri.

Au niveau des ministres Tunisiens des affaires étrangères, le moins que l'on puisse dire, c'est que Abdelwaheb Abdallah n'a pas été en odeur de sainteté auprès des américains.

«[Abdelwaheb Abdallah] est connu pour ouvrir ses rencontres avec des monologues interminables sur des positions politiques, sociales et économiques, les réussites et les positions modérées de la Tunisie sur les questions régionales. C'est le discours qu'Abdallah lui-même a conçu pendant ses années en tant que conseiller du président, chargé du contrôle des médias nationaux et internationaux. Pendant son mandat de trois ans comme ministre des Affaires étrangères, Abdallah a maintenu une influence notable - si ce n'est un contrôle - sur les médias locaux » [...]« Par exemple, Abdallah me convoqua pour exprimer son «dégout» de la condamnation de la Tunisie pour son traitement des journalistes, par le président Bush lors du 1er mai, journée mondiale pour la Liberté de la Presse. Mais les difficultés sont aussi le résultat des contrôles imposés par le ministère des Affaires étrangères. Ces contrôles limitent la capacité de l'Ambassade de s'engager avec d'autres organismes, et avec les universités, les organisations professionnelles et syndicales du pays » (VZCZCXRO1905, sec.8)

« [Abdelwaheb Abdallah] has been known to open his meetings with lengthy soliloquies about Tunisia's political, social, and economic successes and moderate positions on regional issues. This is the spin that Abdallah himself crafted during his years as Presidential Advisor responsible for domestic media control and international media spin. During his three-year tenure as Foreign Minister, Abdallah has maintained significant influence -- if not control -- over the local media" [...] "For example, Abdallah convoked me to express his "disgust" that Tunisia was condemned for its treatment of journalists in

President Bush's May 1 statement on World Press Freedom. But the difficulties are also the result of the controls imposed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These controls limit the Embassy's ability to engage with other agencies, and with universities, business organizations and even the country's labor union" (VZCZCXRO1905, sec.8).

Ailleurs, on y apprend :

« Nous avons été bloqués, en partie, par le ministère des Affaires étrangères qui vise à contrôler l'ensemble de nos contacts avec le gouvernement et de nombreuses autres organisations. »

«We have been blocked, in part, by a Foreign Ministry that seeks to control all our contacts in the government and many other organizations.»(VZCZCXRO0363, sec.2).»

En revanche, s'agissant de l'actuel ministre des Affaires étrangères Kamel Morjane, celui-ci semble jouir d'une relative estime de la part de la diplomatie américaine. Il est du reste dépeint comme celui qui a cherché à limiter les dégâts de son prédécesseur.

On notera également de longs passages concernant Sakhr El Matri, lesquels, entre autres révèlent cette promiscuité si malsaine entre les affaires et la politique. On retiendra cette anecdote, très révélatrice, qui a eu lieu à l'ambassade US où l'en passe du politique aux affaires d'El Matri sans la moindre pudeur. Celui qui aspire à obtenir une franchise McDonald en Tunisie se voit rétorquer par l'ambassadeur US que ceci nécessite des autorisations légales (de la part de l'administration tunisienne). Réponse d'El Matri : « ceci n'est pas un problème ». Et pour cause !

Voici le passage en question :

« El-Matri a aussi exprimé son intérêt pour l'ouverture d'une franchise de restaurant McDonalds. Lorsque l'ambassadeur a déclaré que les entreprises américaines avaient besoin d'une législation sur les franchises avant d'investir, il a répondu: "cela n'est pas un problème", et a suggéré que la première franchise pourrait s'ouvrir dans le port pour bateaux de croisières qu'il développe à La Goulette. »

« El-Matri also expressed interest in opening a McDonalds restaurant franchise. When the Ambassador said US companies needed a franchise law before investing, he

responded, "that would not be a problem," and suggested a likely first option would be to open a franchise in the new cruise port he is developing in La Goulette. » (VZCZCXYZ0008, sec. 3).

Au demeurant, le contenu de ce document donnera de la matière à gloser à nos deux experts nationaux en « *science des agendas* » ; en l'occurrence Borhène Bsaïs et Boubaker Sghair. Sûrement, ils ne manqueront pas de reprendre les longs passages concernant Sakhr El Matri pour nous parler de son agenda lorsqu'il franchit le pas de l'ambassade US. Nos deux « messieurs agenda », aux compétences reconnues en la matière, nous ont habitués à ne louper aucune occasion pour discourir sur leur thème favori « ambassade et agenda ».

IV.- Les Silences troublants

Parmi les éléments les plus troublants, du moins concernant les documents que nous avons examinés, c'est cette absence flagrante des forces démocratiques tunisiennes au niveau des échanges entre l'ambassade US et le département d'Etat. L'opposition démocratique est mentionnée à deux ou trois reprises, mais c'est presque d'une manière collatérale, voire accidentelle. Et ce qui est d'autant plus troublant, c'est que malgré le fait que la diplomatie américaine n'attend que le départ de Ben Ali pour observer un réel changement « Tout changement majeur en Tunisie devra attendre le départ de Ben Ali » (« *Major change in Tunisia will have to wait for Ben Ali's departure* »), l'opposition démocratique dans ce contexte n'incarne ni une alternative sérieuse ni même une force politique avec laquelle il serait utile d'avoir des rapports étroits.

Il faut dire que cela confirme ce que nous avons par le passé écrit sur Nawaat, et qui incarne à nos yeux un réel problème tunisien. « *Que cette opposition devienne tellement insignifiante, tellement inexistante au regard des gouvernements alliés de la Tunisie [avons-nous eu l'occasion d'écrire] est difficile à avaler. [...] On ne devient pas une opposition qui incarne le changement démocratique en le proclamant, mais par la capacité, d'une part, à convaincre et à entraîner l'opinion publique en ce sens et, d'autre part, à gagner par ce biais la crédibilité des partenaires de la Tunisie quant au changement que l'on promet.* »

Juxtaposer cette non-considération des forces démocratiques tunisiennes avec les considérations réelles au niveau des questions des droits de l'homme en Tunisie par une nation étrangère, laquelle se met en position de protéger les Tunisiens sur leur propre territoire, a de quoi empêcher de dormir beaucoup de Tunisiens. Quand on songe à la défaillance indigne du gouvernement tunisien à s'enquérir du respect des garanties et droits fondamentaux des Tunisiens détenus à Guantanamo, C'est déjà très grave. Mais qu'ensuite les anciens geôliers de ces Tunisiens se retrouvent eux-mêmes dans la peau de ceux qui se démènent pour garantir leurs droits fondamentaux et leur intégrité physique en Tunisie ; cela frôle l'insupportable pour quiconque accorde un minimum d'honneur à la citoyenneté tunisienne et des droits qui s'y rattachent ! Et c'est face à de tels faits que l'on se demande comment des ministres, des parlementaires, des magistrats et des hommes politiques tunisiens peuvent se regarder dans la glace le matin. Que l'on soit très clair, que les Américains se démènent pour garantir la sécurité de ceux qui on subit les affres de Guantanamo, c'est la moindre des choses pour restaurer leur honneur. En revanche, pour nous Tunisiens, faisons-nous assez pour justement réhabiliter cet honneur qui devrait être celui de nos institutions républicaines dont la finalité ULTIME, faut-il le rappeler, est de garantir les droits fondamentaux du citoyen ?

Au fond, les magouilles affairistes et politiques d'El Matri, A. Abdallah ou des Trabelsi sont tellement secondaires, sinon une conséquence logique de l'altération de ce qui est autrement plus fondamental : la place et le statut de la citoyenneté tunisienne au sein des institutions de la République. Aurions-nous su les défendre bec et ongle, ces institutions, depuis 1987, l'opposition démocratique en tête et nous n'en serions sûrement pas là aujourd'hui.

Enfin à chacun de lire, de se faire une idée et donner du sens aux faits mentionnés. Le débat est ouvert. Ce qui est certain en tout cas, c'est que la transparence aura toujours du bon.

Nous reviendrons sur ces documents, y compris sur d'autres dès que nous en disposerons. Nous les

mettrons en forme, les classerons en catégorie et les taguons pour en faciliter la l'accès ... d'ici là, bonne lecture.

Pour suivre les nouvelles sur ce sujet, retrouvez-nous sur ce site dédié <https://tunileaks.appspot.com> et assurez-vous que vous vous y connectez en HTTPS et non en HTTP. Vous pouvez également le faire en nous suivant sur notre compte twitter [@nawaat](https://twitter.com/nawaat) et facebook.

Nawaat.org, le dimanche 28 novembre 2010

En partageant ou en re-publiant ce document, merci de ne pas en omettre ses deux sources :

- ★ <https://tunileaks.appspot.com>
- ★ <http://nawaat.org/portail/2010/11/28/tunileaks-les-documents-devoiles-par-wikileaks-concernant-la-tunisie-quelques-reactions-a-chaud>

PS : Quelques acronymes pour aider la lecture des documents

- **GOT** - The Government of Tunisia
- **USG** - US Government
- **ATA** - Anti-terrorism Assistance
- **DS** - Diplomatic Security
- **MOI** - Ministry of Interior
- **MOD** - Ministry of Defense
- **MFA** - Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- **DCM** - Deputy Chief of Mission
- **RSO** - Regional Security Officer
- **AQIM**- Al Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb
- **ICRC** - International Committee of the Red Cross
- **FMF** - Foreign Military Financing
- **PKO** - Peacekeeping Operations
- **SOFA** - Status of Forces Agreement
- **TIFA** - Investment Framework Agreement
- **JMC** - Joint Military Commission
- **AFRICOM IKD** - AFRICOM Intelligence and Knowledge Development
- **SRSR** - Special Representative of the Secretary-General
- **MOU** - Memorandum of Understanding
- **R-TX** - Republican, Texas
- **Section 1206** - Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) provides the Secretary of Defense with authority to train and equip foreign military and foreign maritime security forces.



Les Clés explicatives de l'entête des câbles diplomatiques US

1. 09TUNIS129 Date06/03/2009 12:05 OriginEmbassy Tunis ClassificationSECRET//NOFORN Header
2. VZCZCXRO2013
3. PP RUEHTRO
4. DE RUEHTU #0129/01 0651205
5. ZNY SSSSS ZZH
6. P 061205Z MAR 09
7. FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
8. TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6025
9. INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 7725
10. S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 08 TUNIS 000129
11. NOFORN
12. SIPDIS
13. DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/ITA, DS/IP/NEA
14. E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2019
15. TAGS: ASEC, PTER, TS
16. SUBJECT: TUNIS SECURITY ENVIRONMENT PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE
17. Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

1. Date, origine du document et niveau de classification (secret//non diffusable aux étrangers)
2. Identifiant de transmission: Les messages du département d'Etat commencent par V et ZCZC
Les adresses : les deux premières lettres indiquent le niveau de l'urgence de la transmission du document au sein du réseau. Z signifie nouvelle dépêche, O pour l'immédiateté, P pour priorité et R pour Routine
3. RUEHTU sont des indicateurs de routage
4. DE signifie "de la part de", RUEHTU l'ambassade US à Tunis. 1137 un num série. 01 apparaît lorsqu'il y a plusieurs segments. La dernière partie, c'est le temps de transmission. 0 pour le enième jour de l'année. Le temps est indiqué en GMT
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7. L'expéditeur écrit en plein texte. FM pour "de la part de"
8. L'essentiel des adresses écrites en plein texte. RUEHC c'est le ministère des Affaires étrangères. Avec ce nombre, le trafic peut être tracé
9. Stations à informer, suivie de la priorité
10. Type de classification
11. nofor : "Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals" Non diffusable aux étrangers »
12. Distribution SIPRNet : (Secret Internet Protocol Router Network) de l'administration américaine, utilisé pour la transmission de documents secrets
13. Adressé aux départements (NEA, c'est le département des affaires du Moyen au sein du ministère des affaires étrangères)
14. Classification selon l'"Executive Order" 12958
15. Analyse du trafic selon la lieu et le Sujet (TAGS). Tout télégramme se doit d'inclure une référence - Le P pour affaires politiques
16. Sujet en plein texte
17. Classé par : la personne indiquée. Raison: 1.4 b =Information d'un gouvernement étranger.

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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)
STATE PASS USTR (BURKHEAD)
USDOC FOR ITA/MAC/ONE (NATHAN MASON), ADVOCACY CTR
(REITZE), AND CLDP (TEJTEL AND MCMANUS)
CASABLANCA FOR FCS (ORTIZ)
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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/23/2018
TAGS: ECON KCOR PGOV EINV EFIN SOCI TS
SUBJECT: CORRUPTION IN TUNISIA: WHAT'S YOURS IS MINE

REF: A. TUNIS 615
B. TUNIS 568
C. TUNIS 365
D. TUNIS 169
E. TUNIS 113
F. 07 TUNIS 1489
G. 07 TUNIS 1443
H. 07 TUNIS 1433
I. 06 TUNIS 2848
J. 06 TUNIS 1673
K. 06 TUNIS 1672
L. 06 TUNIS 1630
M. 06 TUNIS 1622
N. 01 TUNIS 2971

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (S) According to Transparency International's annual survey and Embassy contacts' observations, corruption in Tunisia is getting worse. Whether it's cash, services, land, property, or yes, even your yacht, President Ben Ali's family is rumored to covet it and reportedly gets what it wants.

Beyond the stories of the First Family's shady dealings, Tunisians report encountering low-level corruption as well in interactions with the police, customs, and a variety of government ministries. The economic impact is clear, with Tunisian investors -- fearing the long-arm of "the Family" -forgoing new investments, keeping domestic investment rates low and unemployment high (Refs G, H). These persistent rumors of corruption, coupled with rising inflation and continued unemployment, have helped to fuel frustration with the GOT and have contributed to recent protests in southwestern Tunisia (Ref A). With those at the top believed to be the worst offenders, and likely to remain in power, there are no checks in the system. End Summary.

The Sky's the Limit

2. (C) According to Transparency International's 2007 index, the perception is that corruption in Tunisia is getting worse. Tunisia's ranking on the index dropped from 43 in 2005 to 61 in 2007 (out of 179 countries) with a score of 4.2 (with 1 the most corrupt and 10 the least corrupt). Although corruption is hard to verify and even more difficult to quantify, our contacts all agree that the situation is headed in the wrong direction. When asked whether he thought corruption was better, worse, or the same, XXXXXXXXXXXX exclaimed in exasperation, "Of course it's getting worse!" He stated that corruption could not but increase as the culprits looked for more and more opportunities. Joking about Tunisia's rising inflation, he said that even the cost of bribes was up. "A traffic stop used to cost you 20 dinars and now it's up to 40 or 50!"

All in the Family

3. (S) President Ben Ali's extended family is often cited as the nexus of Tunisian corruption. Often referred to as a quasi-mafia, an oblique mention of "the Family" is enough to indicate which family you mean. Seemingly half of the Tunisian business community can claim a Ben Ali connection through marriage, and many of these relations are reported to have made the most of their lineage. Ben Ali's wife, Leila Ben Ali, and her extended family -- the Trabelsis -- provoke the greatest ire from Tunisians. Along with the numerous allegations of Trabelsi corruption are often barbs about their lack of education, low social status, and conspicuous consumption. While some of the complaints about the Trabelsi clan seem to emanate from a disdain for their nouveau riche inclinations, Tunisians also argue that the Trabelsis strong arm tactics and flagrant abuse of the system make them easy to hate. Leila's brother Belhassen Trabelsi is the most notorious family member and is rumored to have been involved in a wide-range of corrupt schemes from the recent Banque de Tunisie board shakeup (Ref B) to property expropriation and extortion of bribes. Leaving the question of their progenitor aside, Belhassen Trabelsi's holdings are extensive and include an airline, several hotels, one of Tunisia's two private radio stations, car assembly plants, Ford distribution, a real estate development company, and the list goes on. (See Ref K for a more extensive list of his holdings.) Yet, Belhassen is only one of Leila's ten known siblings, each with their

own children. Among this large extended family, Leila's brother Moncef and nephew Imed are also particularly important economic actors.

4. (S/NF) The President is often given a pass, with many Tunisians arguing that he is being used by the Trabelsi clan and is unaware of their shady dealings. XXXXXXXXXXXXX a strong supporter of the government and member of XXXXXXXXXXXXX, told the Ambassador that the problem is not Ben Ali, but "the Family" going too far and breaking the rules. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe Ben Ali is not aware, at least generally, of the growing corruption problem.

This might also reflect the seeming geographical divisions between the Ben Ali and Trabelsi fiefdoms, with the Ben Ali clan reportedly focused on the central coastal regional and the Trabelsi clan operating out of the greater Tunis area and therefore, generating the bulk of the gossip. The Ben Ali side of the Family and his children and in-laws from his first marriage are also implicated in a number of stories.

Ben Ali has seven siblings, of which his late brother Moncef was a known drug trafficker, sentenced in absentia to 10 years prison in the French courts. Ben Ali has three children with his first wife Naima Kefi: Ghaouna, Dorsaf and Cyrine. They are married respectively to Slim Zarrouk, Slim Chiboub, and Marouane Mabrouk -- all significant economic powers.

This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land

5. (S/NF) With real estate development booming and land prices on the rise, owning property or land in the right location can either be a windfall or a one-way ticket to expropriation. In summer 2007, Leila Ben Ali received a desirable tract of land in Carthage for free from the GOT in order to build the for-profit Carthage International School (Ref F). In addition to the land, the school received a 1.8 million dinar (US \$1.5 million) gift from the GOT, and within a matter of weeks the GOT had built new roads and stoplights to facilitate school access. It has been reported that Ms.

Ben Ali has sold the Carthage International School to Belgian investors, but the Belgian Embassy has as yet been unable to confirm or discount the rumor. XXXXXXXXXXXXX asserted that the school was indeed sold for a huge, but undisclosed sum.

He noted any such sale would be pure profit since Ms. Ben Ali's received land, infrastructure, and a hefty bonus at no cost.

6. (S/NF) Construction on an enormous and garish mansion has been underway next to the Ambassador's residence for the past year. Multiple sources have told us that the home is that of Sakhr Materi, President Ben Ali's son-in-law and owner of Zitouna Radio. This prime real estate was reportedly expropriated from its owner by the GOT for use by the water authority, then later granted to Materi for private use. A cafe owner recounted a similar tale to an Embassy employee, reporting that Belhassen Trabelsi forced him to trade in a cafe he previously owned in a prime location for his current cafe. The cafe owner stated Trabelsi told him he could do whatever he wanted there; if 50 dinar bribes to the police were not effective, Trabelsi said the owner had only to call him and he would "take care of it."

Yacht Wanted

6. (S/NF) In 2006, Imed and Moaz Trabelsi, Ben Ali's nephews, are reported to have stolen the yacht of a well-connected French businessman, Bruno Roger, Chairman of Lazard Paris. The theft, widely reported in the French press, came to light when the yacht, freshly painted to cover distinguishing characteristics, appeared in the Sidi Bou Said harbor. Roger's prominence in the French establishment created a potential irritant in bilateral relations and according to reports, the yacht was swiftly returned. The stolen yacht affair resurfaced in early 2008 due to an Interpol warrant for the two Trabelsis. In May, the brothers were brought before Tunisian courts, in a likely effort to satisfy international justice. The outcome of their case has not been reported.

Show Me Your Money

7. (S) Tunisia's financial sector remains plagued by serious allegations of corruption and financial mismanagement.

Tunisian business people joke that the most important relationship you can have is with your banker, reflecting the importance of personal connections rather than a solid business plan in securing financing. The legacy of relationship-based banking is a sector-wide rate of non-performing loans that is 19 percent, which remains high but is lower than a high of 25 percent in 2001 (Ref I).

Embassy contacts are quick to point out that many of these loans are held by wealthy Tunisian business people who use their close ties to the regime to avoid repayment (Ref E).

Lax oversight makes the banking sector an excellent target of opportunity, with multiple stories of "First Family" schemes.

The recent reshuffle at Banque de Tunisie (Ref B), with the Foreign Minister's wife assuming the presidency and Belhassen Trabelsi named to the board, is the latest example.

According to a representative from Credit Agricole, Marouane Mabrouk, another of Ben Ali's sons-in-law, purchased a 17 percent share of the former Banque du Sud (now Attijari Bank) shares immediately prior to the bank's privatization. This 17 percent share was critical to acquiring controlling interest in the bank since the privatization represented only a 35 percent share in the bank. The Credit Agricole rep stated that Mabrouk shopped his shares to foreign banks with a significant premium, with the tender winner, Spanish-Moroccan Santander-Attijariwafa ultimately paying an off the books premium to Mabrouk. XXXXXXXXXXXXX recounted that when he was still at his bank he used to receive phone calls from panicked clients who stated that Belhassen Trabelsi had asked them for money. He did not indicate whether he advised them to pay.

The Trickle Down Effect

8. (S) While the stories of high-level, Family corruption are among the most flagrant and oft-repeated, Tunisians report encountering low-level corruption more frequently in their daily lives. Speeding tickets

can be ignored, passports can be expedited, and customs can be bypassed -- all for the right price. Donations to the GOT's 26-26 Fund for development or to the Bessma Society for the Handicapped - Leila Ben Ali's favored charity -- are also believed to grease the wheels. Hayet Louani (protect), a well-connected member of Parliament, faced increased pressure from the GOT after refusing several "requests" to donate money to Trabelsi's soccer team. XXXXXXXXXXXXX reported that customs inspectors demanded 10,000 dinars to get his goods through customs; he did not reveal whether or not he acquiesced to the demand.

9. (S) Nepotism is also believed to play a significant role in awarding scholarships and offering jobs. Knowing the right people at the Ministry of Higher Education can determine admission to the best schools or can mean a scholarship for study abroad. An Embassy FSN stated that the Director of International Cooperation, a long-time contact, offered to give his son a scholarship to Morocco on the basis of their acquaintance. If you do not know someone, money can also do the trick. There are many stories of Tunisians paying clerks at the Ministry of Higher Education to get their children into better schools than were merited by their test scores. Government jobs -- a prize in Tunisia -- are also believed to be doled out on the basis of connections.

Leila Ben Ali's late mother, Hajja Nana, is also reported to have acted as a broker for both school admissions and government job placement, providing her facilitation services for a commission. Among the complaints from the protestors in the mining area of Gafsa were allegations that jobs in the Gafsa Phosphate Company were given on the basis of connections and bribery.

Mob Rule?

10. (S/NF) The numerous stories of familial corruption are certainly galling to many Tunisians, but beyond the rumors of money-grabbing is a frustration that the well-connected can live outside the law. One Tunisian lamented that Tunisia was no longer a police state, it had become a state run by the mafia. "Even the police report to the Family!" he exclaimed.

With those at the top believed to be the worst offenders, and likely to remain in power, there are no checks in the system. The daughter of a former governor recounted that Belhassen Trabelsi flew into her father's office in a rage -even throwing an elderly office clerk to the ground -- after being asked to abide by laws requiring insurance coverage for his amusement park. Her father wrote a letter to President Ben Ali defending his decision and denouncing Trabelsi's tactics. The letter was never answered, and he was removed from his post shortly thereafter. The GOT's strong censorship of the press ensures that stories of familial corruption are not published. The Family's corruption remains a red line that the press cross at their own peril.

Although the February imprisonment of comedian Hedi Oula Baballah was ostensibly drug-related, human rights groups speculate his arrest was punishment for a 30 minute stand-up routine spoofing the President and his in-laws (Tunis D).

International NGOs have made the case that the harsh prison conditions faced by journalist Slim Boukdhir, who was arrested for failing to present his ID card and insulting a police officer, are directly related to his articles criticizing government corruption. Corruption remains a topic relegated to hushed voices with quick glances over the shoulder.

The Elephant in the Room

11. (S) Several Tunisian economists argue that it does not matter whether corruption is actually increasing because "perception is reality." The perception of increasing corruption and the persistent rumors of shady backroom dealings has a negative impact on the economy regardless of the veracity. Contacts tell us they are afraid to invest for fear that the family will suddenly want a cut. "What's the point?" Alaya Bettaieb asked, "The best case scenario is that my investment succeeds and someone important tries to take a cut." Persistently low domestic investment rates bear this out (Ref H). Foreign bank accounts, while illegal, are reportedly commonplace. A recent Ministry of Finance amnesty to encourage Tunisians to repatriate their funds has been an abject failure. Bettaieb stated that he plans to incorporate his new business in Mauritania or Malta, citing fear of unwanted interference. Many economists and business people note that strong investment in real estate and land reflects the lack of confidence in the economy and an effort to keep their money safe (Ref C).

12. (S) Thus far, foreign investors have been undeterred, and according to Tunisian business contacts, largely unaffected.

Foreign investment continues to flow in at a healthy rate, even excluding the privatizations and huge Gulf projects which have yet to get underway. Foreign investors more rarely report encountering the type of extortion faced by Tunisians, perhaps reflecting that foreign investors have recourse to their own embassies and governments. British Gas representatives told the Ambassador they had not encountered any impropriety. XXXXXXXXXXXXX stated that several years ago Belhassen Trabelsi attempted to strong arm a German company producing in the offshore sector, but that after the German Embassy intervened Trabelsi was explicitly cautioned to avoid offshore companies. Despite pronouncements about increasing domestic investment, the GOT focuses heavily on increasing FDI flows to the country, particularly in the offshore sector. Nevertheless, there are still several examples of foreign companies or investors being pressured into joining with the "right" partner. The prime example remains McDonald's failed entry into Tunisia. When McDonald's chose to limit Tunisia to one franchisee not of the GOT's choosing, the whole deal was scuttled by the GOT's refusal to grant the necessary authorization and Macdonald's unwillingness to play the game by granting a license to a franchisee with Family connections.

Comment

13. (S) Although the petty corruption rankles, it is the excesses of President Ben Ali's family that inspire outrage among Tunisians. With Tunisians facing rising inflation and high unemployment, the conspicuous displays of wealth and persistent rumors of corruption have added fuel to the fire.

The recent protests in the mining region of Gafsa provide a potent reminder of the discontent that remains largely beneath the surface. This government has based its legitimacy on its ability to deliver economic growth, but a growing number of Tunisians believe those at the top are keeping the benefits for themselves.

14. (S) Corruption is a problem that is at once both political and economic. The lack of transparency and accountability that characterize Tunisia's political system similarly plague the economy, damaging the investment climate and fueling a culture of corruption. For all the talk of a Tunisian economic miracle and all the positive statistics, the fact that Tunisia's own investors are steering clear speaks volumes.

Corruption is the elephant in the room; it is the problem everyone knows about, but no one can publicly acknowledge. End Comment.

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S E C R E T TUNIS 000516

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG; INR/B

EO 12958 DECL: 02/28/2017
TAGS PREL, PTER, PGOV, PINR, ENRG, EAID, TS
SUBJECT: TUNISIA: DINNER WITH SAKHER EL MATERI

REF: TUNIS 338

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S) The Ambassador and his wife had dinner with Mohammad Sakher El Materi and his wife, Nesrine Ben Ali El Materi, at their Hammamet home July 17. During the lavish dinner Al Materi raised the question of the American Cooperative School of Tunis and said he would seek to “fix the problem prior to the Ambassador’s departure” as a gesture to a “friend.” He praised President Obama’s policies and advocated a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians. He also expressed interest in opening a McDonald’s franchise and complained about the government’s delay in passing a franchise law. He

expressed pride in his Islamic Zaitouna radio and in the interviews with opposition party leaders published in his newly purchased newspaper publishing group. During the evening, El Materi was alternately difficult and kind. He seemed, on occasion, to be seeking approval. He was living, however, in the midst of great wealth and excess, illustrating one reason resentment of President Ben Ali's in-laws is increasing. End Summary.

The ACST Situation

2. (S) Presidential son-in-law and wealthy businessman Mohamed Sakher El Materi, and his wife, Nesrine Ben Ali El Materi hosted the Ambassador and his wife for dinner at their Hammamet beach residence July 17. El Materi raised the American Cooperative School of Tunis (ACST), asking what was happening. The Ambassador explained the situation and emphasized that there is anger and concern in Washington and the English-speaking American/international community in Tunis. He said if the school is closed, there would be serious consequences in our relations. El Materi said he could help and would seek to resolve the situation immediately, i.e., prior to the Ambassador's departure. He wished, he said, to do so for a "friend." He noted that he had helped the UK Ambassador secure several appointments (including a lunch with the Prime Minister) for UK Prince Andrew during his recent visit. Before his intervention, El Materi said, the Prince had only one appointment with a single Minister.

Freedom of Expression

3. (S) Ambassador raised the need for more freedom of expression and association in Tunisia. El Materi agreed. He complained that, as the new owner of Dar Assaba, the largest private newspaper group in the country, he has been getting calls from the Minister of Communications complaining about articles he has been running (Comment: This is doubtful). He laughed and suggested that sometimes he wants to "give Dar Assaba back." El Materi noted the interviews his newspapers have been running with opposition leaders (he mentioned FDTL Secretary General Mustapha Ben Jaafar). He was clearly proud of the interviews.

4. (S) El Materi said it was important to help others, noting that was one reason he had adopted a son. The Ambassador mentioned the Embassy's humanitarian assistance projects, noting they could not get media coverage. El Materi said forcefully they should be covered, that it was important the Embassy seek such coverage. He said it would counteract some of the negative US image. The Ambassador asked if El Materi would send reporters to do stories on the US assistance projects. El Materi said yes, absolutely.

5. (S) El Materi complained at length about Tunisian bureaucracy, saying it is difficult to get things done. He said communication inside the bureaucracy is terrible. He said people often "bring wrong information" to the President implying he had to get involved sometimes to get things corrected.

On Exterior Politics and Economics

6. (S) El Materi praised President Barack Obama's new policies. He said the invasion of Iraq was a very serious US mistake that had strengthened Iran and bred hatred of the United States in the Arab world.

He pressed for a two state solution to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and indicated Tunisia needs to accelerate convertibility of the dinar. In general, however, El Materi's knowledge of and interest in international political and economic issues seemed limited.

7. (S) The Ambassador raised economic liberalization, noting the importance of opening up to franchising. El Materi agreed, noting that he would be pleased to assist McDonald's to enter Tunisia, suggesting they begin at the new cruise port in La Goulette. He complained about the unhealthy food served by McDonald's, however, adding it is making Americans fat. He also complained about the GOT's delay in passing a franchising law.

8. (S) The Ambassador noted he has been asking Tunisians what ideas they have for the new US President and Administration. El Materi commented that Nesrine would like more done on the environment. The Ambassador responded by explaining some of the Administration's policies on the environment. El Materi said Nesrine is focused on organic products and wants everything (even the paint and varnish) in their new house in Sidi Bou Said (next to the Ambassador's residence) to be organic.

Islam

9. (S) El Materi said he had begun to practice Islam seriously at 17. He repeatedly said he was practicing, and had a strong faith. (NB. He went off to pray at the sunset call to prayer.) He suggested that if you have faith and pray to God, he will help. He emphasized that his religion is personal, and he does not believe it is appropriate to impose his views on others. (Comment. During the evening, El Materi seemed at his most passionate when describing the Koran, his belief in one God, and the importance of Mohamed as the final prophet of God.)

10. (S) El Materi said he was proud of Zeitouna radio, the first and only Tunisian Koranic radio station, and discussed how Zeitouna bank would be opening. He hopes to create a regional version of Zeitouna radio to spread the Malakite school of Islam. He expressed the view that Islamists and extremists pose a great threat to Islam and modernity. He said he follows Islam, but modern Islam.

El-Materi Unplugged: Home/Personal Life

11. (S) El-Materi's house is spacious, and directly above and along the Hammamet public beach. The compound is large and well guarded by government security. It is close to the center of Hammamet, with a view of the fort and the southern part of the town. The house was recently renovated and includes an infinity pool and a terrace of perhaps 50 meters. While the house is done in a modern style (and largely white), there are ancient artifacts everywhere: Roman columns, frescoes and even a lion's head from which water pours into the pool. El Materi insisted the pieces are real. He hopes to move into his new (and palatial) house in Sidi Bou Said in eight to ten months.

12. (S) The dinner included perhaps a dozen dishes, including fish, steak, turkey, octopus, fish couscous and much more. The quantity was sufficient for a very large number of guests. Before dinner a wide array of small dishes were served, along with three different juices (including Kiwi juice, not normally available here). After dinner, he served ice cream and frozen yoghurt he brought in by plane from Saint Tropez, along with blueberries and raspberries and fresh fruit and chocolate cake. (NB. El Materi and Nesrine had just returned from Saint Tropez on their private jet after two weeks vacation. El Materi was

concerned about his American pilot finding a community here. The Ambassador said he would be pleased to invite the pilot to appropriate American community events.)

13. (S) El Materi has a large tiger (“Pasha”) on his compound, living in a cage. He acquired it when it was a few weeks old. The tiger consumes four chickens a day. (Comment: The situation reminded the Ambassador of Uday Hussein’s lion cage in Baghdad.) El Materi had staff everywhere. There were at least a dozen people, including a butler from Bangladesh and a nanny from South Africa. (NB. This is extraordinarily rare in Tunisia, and very expensive.)

14. (S) They have three children, two girls and a boy. Leila is four and another daughter that is about 10 months. Their boy is adopted and is two years old. The youngest daughter is a Canadian citizen, by virtue of birth in Canada. The family’s favorite vacation destination spot is the Maldives Islands.

15. (S) El Materi said he has begun an exercise and diet regime. He has, he said, recently lost weight (it was visibly true). El Materi said he eats in a “balanced” way. He had just spent an hour on a bike, he claimed. Nesrine said she gets no exercise.

16. (S) Both El Materi and Nesrine speak English, although their vocabulary and grammar are limited. They are clearly eager to strengthen their English. Nesrine said she loves Disney World, but had put off a trip this year because of H1N1 flu. Nesrine has, for sometime, had Tamiflu nearby (even taking it on trips). Originally it was out of fear of bird flu. She packs it for El Materi too when he travels. Nesrine said she has visited several US cities. El Materi had only been to Illinois recently in connection with the purchase of a plane.

Comment

17. (S) Throughout the evening, El Materi often struck the Ambassador as demanding, vain and difficult. He is clearly aware of his wealth and power, and his actions reflected little finesse. He repeatedly pointed out the lovely view from his home and frequently corrected his staff, issued orders and barked reprimands. Despite this, El Materi was aware of his affect on the people around him and he showed periodic kindness. He was unusually solicitous and helpful to the Ambassador’s wife, who is disabled. Occasionally, he seemed to be seeking approval. One western Ambassador in Tunis, who knows El Materi, has commented that he has western-style political skills in his willingness to engage with ordinary citizens. It is an uncommon trait here.

18. (S) El Materi, in recent months, has been ever more visible in the local diplomatic community. He has clearly decided (or been told) to serve as a point of contact between the regime and key ambassadors. Nesrine, at age 23, appeared friendly and interested, but nave and clueless. She reflected the very sheltered, privileged and wealthy life she has led. As for the dinner itself, it was similar to what one might experience in a Gulf country, and out of the ordinary for Tunisia.

19. (S) Most striking of all, however, was the opulence with which El Materi and Nesrine live. Their home in Hammamet was impressive, with the tiger adding to the impression of “over the top.” Even more extravagant is their home still under construction in Sidi Bou Said. That residence, from its outward appearance, will be closer to a palace. It dominates the Sidi Bou Said skyline from some vantage points and has been the occasion of many private, critical comments. The opulence with which El Materi and Nesrine live and their behavior make clear why they and other members of Ben Ali’s family are disliked and even hated by some Tunisians. The excesses of the Ben Ali family are growing.

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/28/2018

TAGS: PREL PTER PHUM PGOV KPAL KDRG KDEM TS

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BEN ALI MEETS WITH A/S WELCH: PROGRESS ON COUNTER-
TERRORISM COOPERATION, REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S/NF) President Ben Ali and NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch discussed regional and bilateral issues in a wide-ranging, warm and open meeting on Thursday, February 28. In response to A/S Welch's remarks and requests, President Ben Ali:

- promised counter-terrorism cooperation "without reservation," including US access to a terrorist in Tunisian custody;
- said the GOT would accept the ten remaining Tunisian detainees in Guantanamo on the basis of the constitution;
- welcomed the Annapolis peace process, adding that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is "optimistic" a deal will be concluded and plans to visit Tunis in March; and,

-- said there is "no reason" for an Arab League Summit in Damascus unless there is a Lebanese president and opined that the meeting might be postponed or representation downgraded.

2. (S/NF) Welch and Ben Ali also covered US-Libyan relations, relations between Morocco and Algeria, the situation in Iraq and the challenge of Iran. The constructive session underscored again that Tunisia is prepared to play a moderate, but not a leadership, role on regional problems. Overall, Ben Ali was clearly pleased with Welch's visit and it received wide media coverage. End

Meeting: The Setting

3. (S/NF) During his February 27 - 29 visit, NEA A/S David Welch met with President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali for one hour 45 minutes at the Presidential Palace in Carthage on Thursday, February 28. Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah and Ambassador Godec were also present. The Director of Tunisia's External Communications Agency (ATCE), Oussama Romdhani, was the interpreter.

Bilateral Relations: CT Cooperation "Without Reservation"

4. (S/NF) Ben Ali began by emphasizing the excellent, "strategic" relations between the United States and Tunisia. He continued, however, that he understood the United States had concerns about cooperation on counter-terrorism. Ben Ali said he had ordered Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem and other senior officials to cooperate with the United States "without reservation" on counter-terrorism.

5. (S/NF) The President stressed that Tunisia cooperated with the United States on terrorism out of conviction, and said broader, deeper international cooperation is essential. Many countries, he said, have suffered as the result of terrorism. He expressed regret, however, over the human rights criticism Tunisia has faced as the result of its efforts to combat terrorism. Some governments have a "double standard," he said, on the issue. He added "some embassies" in Tunis and human rights groups had taken positions that were "not friendly" over such cases such as the imprisonment of activist Mohammed Abbou and of the "Zarzis group." (NB. The "Zarzis group" refers to six Tunisians detained in 2003 for allegedly preparing to commit terrorist attacks. The six were pardoned by Ben Ali in 2006 following international pressure.) Ben Ali acknowledged that there had been some problems with human rights in Tunisia, but stressed the GOT is addressing them. For example, he said, "tens" of police officers have been tried for corruption and other abuses. He said he would welcome the US Embassy receiving further information. He stressed that the GOT is committed to freedom and human rights, but no one is above the law.

6. (S/NF) A/S Welch thanked Ben Ali and expressed appreciation for his commitment to cooperation on counter-terrorism. He said he had two specific requests: 1) access for US officials to interview Tunisian terrorist Noureddine Taam and 2) a commitment to accept the Tunisian detainees in Guantanamo on the basis of earlier assurances on treatment. Ben Ali responded that the United States would have immediate access to Taam. (NB. Additional details reported in GRPO channels.) He continued that the GOT would accept the detainees and do so on the basis of the Tunisian constitution. (NB. The Tunisian constitution offers guarantees on human rights, humane treatment and respect for international commitments.) Ben Ali emphasized again that on counter-terrorism and intelligence Tunisia would "cooperate with the United States without inhibitions" and the cooperation would be "total."

Libya: Trying to Improve US Relations

7. (S/NF) A/S Welch said the United States is improving relations with Libya, but from time to time has difficulties with leader Muammar Qadhafi. Welch asked that Ben Ali communicate to Qadhafi that the United States wants to continue to improve relations. Ben Ali replied that Qadhafi also wants better relations, but there remain "anti-American radicals" in the government. Qadhafi plans, according to Ben Ali, a cabinet reshuffle that would address the problem and we should see how the situation evolves. Qadhafi, Ben Ali opined, is "not a normal person" and had experienced disappointments over the failure of Arab and African unity. Ben Ali promised to raise the US interest in improving relations with Qadhafi in person or by phone.

Middle East: The Peace Process Needs Support

8. (S) Welch stressed that President Bush's highest priority this year is progress toward two states, Palestine and Israel, living side-by-side in peace. While Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert genuinely want peace, some of the Palestinian and Israeli people and leaders are skeptical. Welch stressed that all countries interested in peace need to make every effort to help move the process forward.

9. (S) Ben Ali agreed on the importance of the Annapolis process, adding he had spoken with Abbas who is "optimistic" an agreement will be reached by the end of the year. Nevertheless, progress will remain very difficult. Ben Ali stressed Fatah and Hamas must try to reach an understanding. He noted that Abbas will visit Tunisia in March and there is a proposal for a Fatah-Hamas meeting in Tunis. Ben Ali said he will wait to hear Abbas' views before proceeding on the proposal.

Arab League Summit: Not Without A Lebanese President

10. (S) Welch asked Ben Ali about his views of Syria and the proposed Arab League Summit. Ben Ali responded that Syria is a source of concern. He said Syria is acting for Iran and the latter is fueling regional problems. He said he had met (on February 18) with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim who handed over an invitation from President Bashar Asad to attend the summit in Damascus. He said he told Mu'allim that Syria should help resolve the problems in Lebanon. Ben Ali emphasized the complexity of the situation in Lebanon, noting the unhelpful involvement of many regional actors. He added that there was some support for inviting Iran to the Damascus Summit. Ben Ali said, however, that he saw no reason for the summit unless there is a Lebanese president in attendance. Welch agreed. Ben Ali continued the summit may be postponed, or representation downgraded from the Chief of State level. He noted other states in the region, including Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia agreed. In any event, Ben Ali said he would not attend such a summit.

Iraq: Bleak Situation

11. (S/NF) Ben Ali said the situation in Iraq is "bleak," but we must face it. The only party benefiting currently is Iran, and suggested that Turkey's current actions against the PKK are making matters worse. Welch noted there is some progress on the security situation and the political front in Iraq.

Region: "Explosive"

12. (S) Looking more broadly, Ben Ali noted that Tunisia was happy it was part of the Maghreb, and not part of Levant or Gulf. He opined that the situation in Egypt is "explosive," adding that sooner or later the Muslim Brotherhood would take over. He added that Yemen and Saudi Arabia are also facing real problems. Overall, the region is "explosive."

Maghreb: Resolving the Western Sahara

13. (S) On the Maghreb, Ben Ali suggested extremism is a real and growing problem. Morocco, he said, was at the "beginning of the beginning" of its problem. It had ignored, he added, the issue for too long and former King Hassan II had refused to discuss it. Nevertheless, Morocco was a strategic partner for Tunisia and the GOT was working to strengthen cooperation. On Algeria, Ben Ali, said the problem was a "little better" and may be at the beginning of the end. Ben Ali said Tunisia has strong and direct cooperation on counter-terrorism with Algeria. Welch noted that Morocco and Algeria trust Tunisia more than they trust each other. Welch agreed that there is a terrorism problem in Morocco.

14. (S) On the Western Sahara, Ben Ali said the Algerians are responsible for the ongoing impasse. Welch agreed, saying the issue was blocking progress in the region. He said the Algerians need to accept that there is not going to be an independent state in the Western Sahara. Ben Ali said the problem is complex, and will take years to resolve. He added it cannot be settled through the UN Security Council. He noted Tunisia had tried to convene a Maghreb meeting on it in Tunis. While Morocco and Libya had agreed to attend, Algeria refused, saying there was nothing to discuss.

Iran: A Threat

15. (S) Welch noted that President Bush considered Iran a threat "yesterday, today and tomorrow." Noting the recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, Welch underscored that while the Iranians "may have put the gun in the closet, they are still trying to make the bullet." Nevertheless, he added, there are signs economic pressure is working. Ben Ali concurred. Welch said the chances of a third Security Council resolution are good and President Bush wants a diplomatic option.

16. (S/NF) Ben Ali replied this is "quite wise" of President Bush. He stressed he opposed the use of force, and that "a second front is not needed." Economic pressure on Iran will take longer, but it is working. Ben Ali added that he "does not trust" the Shia.

Invitation: President Bush Welcome

17. (S) President Ben Ali closed the meeting stressing his open invitation to President Bush to visit Tunisia before or after his time in office. Welch expressed his appreciation to Ben Ali for the meeting.

Comment: Warm and Open Ben Ali

18. (S/NF) Throughout the meeting, President Ben Ali was warm, open, and occasionally animated (at which point he sometimes slipped into Tunisian dialect). His quick and strong assurances on counter terrorism cooperation were welcome, and may be an important step forward on what has been a troubling issue. Significantly, the President's promise was followed within hours by action from GOT officials. The key test will be whether cooperation continues and is both broad and deep. Similarly, the President's commitment on Guantanamo detainees was welcome.

19. (S/NF) On regional issues, Ben Ali showed again that he is a moderate. While the Tunisians will not take the lead on foreign policy challenges, they will help where they can (e.g., support for the Annapolis process). Finally, President Ben Ali was clearly very pleased to see A/S Welch and to exchange views with him. The meeting and visit got broad, major media coverage in Tunisia. End Comment.

20. (SBU) A/S Welch did not have a chance to clear this cable.

GODEC

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 08 TUNIS 000129

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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/ITA, DS/IP/NEA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2019

REF: STATE 13023

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (SBU) DEMONSTRATIONS

A. (SBU) ARE THERE ANY ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN COUNTRY CAPABLE OF CARRYING OUT SIGNIFICANT ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS?

The Government of Tunisia (GOT) prohibits demonstrations that are not pre-approved and is capable of controlling and dispersing one in the unlikely event one could be mustered without their knowledge. The only known group capable of implementing this type of demonstration would be the Tunisian labor union UGTT. The UGTT, which is neither ethnic nor religious, maintains a small square outside of its headquarters which they occasionally make use of to hold political rallies, which have included anti-American slogans in the past.

B. (SBU) HAVE THERE BEEN ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE COUNTRY WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS?

There have been no anti-American demonstrations in 2008 or 2009. The GOT is very protective of the area surrounding the Embassy and maintains a large uniformed and plainclothes police presence around the compound. There were many pro-Palestinian rallies across the country this year in reaction to events at Gaza. At these demonstrations, some anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric was allowed.

Witnesses also described a couple incidents of demonstrators burning Israeli and American flags. Historically, there were two small, peaceful government-sponsored demonstrations in solidarity with Lebanon in summer 2006. A few of the demonstrators shouted anti-American slogans and carried anti-American signs. After the Saddam Hussein execution in 2006, the UGTT had a small anti-American rally outside of its headquarters.

C. (SBU) HAVE DEMONSTRATIONS TAKEN PLACE NEAR OR IN FRONT OF U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES? No.

A small group of professional women from the Tunisian Association of Female Researchers assembled briefly outside of the main gate to the compound in January 2009 and displayed signs with the words "Stop the War in Gaza" on them. They were quickly outnumbered by local police who intervened before they reached the visitor access control point. They were allowed to present a petition to an embassy officer who accepted it on behalf of the Ambassador.

D. (SBU) WHAT IS THE AVERAGE SIZE OF AN ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATION? N/A

E. (SBU) ARE ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS USUALLY TRIGGERED BY U.S FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVES, MILITARY ACTIONS, OR BY DOMESTIC ISSUES? N/A

F. (SBU) ARE DEMONSTRATIONS GENERALLY VIOLENT OR PEACEFUL?

Demonstrations are generally peaceful and the GOT strives to ensure this by positioning large numbers of uniformed and plain clothes police officers in the demonstration areas.

However, economic unrest and unemployment led to several large-scale and prolonged demonstrations during the first six months of 2008 in the south-central area of Tunisia. There was violence reported as the demonstrators and the security services clashed in several cities, and the GOT cut off public access to the areas hardest hit and did not permit media reporting of the confrontations. See below (I.) for more details.

G. (SBU) IF VIOLENT, HAVE ANY DEMONSTRATIONS RESULTED IN DAMAGE TO USG PROPERTY OR INJURIES TO USG EMPLOYEES? No.

H. (SBU) IF VIOLENT, HAVE ANY DEMONSTRATORS EVER PENETRATED OUR PERIMETER SECURITY LINE? No.

I. (C) HAVE THERE BEEN ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE COUNTRY WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS? Yes.

Unemployment protests took place in south-central Tunisia in February, April and June of 2008, primarily in the towns of Gafsa, Redeyef, Kasserine, Um El Araies and Feriana. High unemployment, poverty, inflation and a lack of economic development in the mining region in the governorates of Gafsa and Kasserine sparked some of the largest demonstrations Tunisia has seen in years. Ministry of Interior (MOI) and Ministry of Defense (MOD) assets were deployed at various times to restore order. According to reports, police used live ammunition in response to the throwing of petrol bombs.

Some residents and supporters of the demonstrators rejected police claims, dismissing them as ex post facto rationalization for the excessive use of force by the security services. Two demonstrators were shot and killed and many more were wounded. Dozens of protesters were arrested and several senior labor leaders were arrested and subsequently sentenced to up to eight years in prison. Human rights organizations reported that security forces used tear gas, batons, water cannons and dogs to repress demonstrators, and even ransacked homes and businesses in retaliation. The Tunisian military was deployed to the city of Redeyef in June in an effort to end the violence.

J. (SBU) HAVE DEMONSTRATIONS TAKEN PLACE NEAR OR IN FRONT OF U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES? No.

K. (C) WHAT IS THE AVERAGE SIZE OF AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATION?

Public protests in Tunisia are rare. The demonstrations referred to above were confined to the mining region in south-central Tunisia in the governorates of Gafsa and Kasserine. The GOT strictly controls information and the private media practices self-censorship when reporting on matters sensitive to the GOT that could reflect negatively upon it. The GOT attempted to minimize the extent and nature of the demonstrations and initially would not even acknowledge them in official communications. Areas were cordoned off from public access and attempts by Embassy officers to enter these areas were initially rebuffed by security forces at road blocks. However, some did reach Redeyef by utilizing back roads instead of the main highways.

Given the propensity of the GOT to control information, it is not possible to obtain official statistics on the size of the demonstrations. Unofficially, the numbers vary greatly depending on the source. Amateur video footage posted on YouTube suggested that the crowds consisted of more than one thousand persons.

L. (SBU) ARE DEMONSTRATIONS GENERALLY VIOLENT OR PEACEFUL?

Demonstrations are generally peaceful. The events in Gafsa and Kasserine last year prove that people will challenge authority even in a police state, when driven to do so in this instance by severe economic conditions. Over the time period from January until June, there were two deaths reported as a result of the unrest and the response from the security forces. The number of wounded cannot be ascertained because of the lack of credible information regarding the demonstrations.

M. (SBU) IF VIOLENT, HAVE ANY DEMONSTRATIONS RESULTED IN DAMAGE TO USG PROPERTY? No.

2. (SBU) MACRO CONFLICT CONDITIONS

A. (S/NF) IS THE HOST COUNTRY ENGAGED IN AN INTERSTATE OR INTRASTATE CONFLICT? (THIS MAY INCLUDE BATTLES BETWEEN ORGANIZED AND VIOLENT DRUG CARTELS).

There is no interstate or intrastate conflict involving the GOT. The GOT is very proactive in terms of its internal security and utilizes a broad definition of the term terrorist in the application of its interests. GOT security forces disrupted a terror cell in December 2006 and January 2007. Gun battles included two major skirmishes in Hammam Lif and Soliman in the greater Tunis area. The GOT has conveyed to Embassy officers they consider the cell responsible for these actions destroyed. The problems posed by the porous Algerian border were evidenced by the fact that six individuals had crossed into Tunisia undetected with the purported intent of conducting terrorist attacks.

Tunisia also faces illegal cross-border migration from Algeria and Libya to Europe. Criminal cartels, not necessarily based in Tunisia, continue to ferry illegal aliens through Tunisian territorial waters and are often intercepted by Tunisian naval/coast guard units. Recently, there have been increased reports of Tunisians attempting to emigrate illegally, most likely to Italy. Some have met with tragic results because of the poor condition of the boats, no provisions and no life vests. It is also probable these routes are also being used as a conduit for illegal drugs.

B. (SBU) IF AN INTRASTATE CONFLICT, IS IT AN INSURGENCY LIMITED TO A SPECIFIC REGION OR IS IT A COUNTRYWIDE CIVIL WAR?

There is no intrastate conflict within Tunisia.

C. (SBU) IF LIMITED TO A SPECIFIC REGION, ARE ANY U.S.

DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES LOCATED IN THIS REGION?

All U.S. diplomatic facilities are located in Tunis, Specifically the northern suburbs of Les Berges du Lac and Sidi Bou Said.

D. (S/NF) HAVE ANY OF THE FACTIONS INVOLVED IN INTRASTATE CONFLICTS SIGNALLED OR DEMONSTRATED AN ANTI-AMERICAN ORIENTATION?

The GOT claims that the group they disrupted in January 2007 had plans to attack the U.S. and U.K. embassies and select personnel. However, the GOT has not shared any tangible evidence of this to date, nor was any such evidence presented in their trial in late 2007, although one defendant admitted that the group intended to target "crusader" sites. The GOT considers this cell destroyed.

3. (SBU) HOST COUNTRY CAPABILITIES

A. (SBU) ARE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES (LEA) PROFESSIONAL AND WELL-TRAINED?

Yes.

LEA's are professional and adequately trained. Police officers receive one year of general police academy Training and one year follow-on specialized training (i.e. VIP protection, criminal investigations, motorbike patrol).

Police officers who demonstrate high proficiency in their second year of training are recruited for special units (i.e. special forces, anti-terrorist, quick response teams). Local traffic police, a separate entity from other LEA's, also receive specialized training.

The GOT utilizes large numbers of uniformed police officers as a visible deterrent to crime and by extension, terrorism, particularly in the capital and in popular tourist areas. In sensitive areas, such as near government buildings or even the U.S. Embassy, they also utilize plain-clothes officers to supplement their capabilities.

B. (C) HAVE THEY BEEN TRAINED BY U.S. AGENCIES? IF SO, PLEASE ELABORATE ON EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAINING.

Yes, but not recently. DS/ATA has had a long relationship with the GOT, however, the last DS/ATA training occurred in August 2004. Thirty-two GOT officials participated in an airport security management seminar. Since then, DS/ATA has offered a variety of training opportunities, which were either turned down at the last minute or deadlines for participation were not met. The Department of Defense through Embassy Tunis' Office of Security Cooperation has been more successful in providing training to Ministry of Defense personnel but the Ministry of Defense is prohibited from performing police activities.

C. (C) ARE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES CONFRONTED WITH SERIOUS, WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION INSIDE THEIR AGENCIES?

It is widely believed that corruption is a problem within law enforcement agencies, but it is practically impossible to substantiate because the GOT does not release such information. In early 2004, the GOT created the position of Chief Inspector of the Internal Security Forces and Customs within the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to investigate corruption and other law enforcement abuses. Little information about the activities of this group or any other corruption within the Tunisian law

enforcement community is officially released or able to be verified, therefore it is difficult if not impossible to assess the level of internal corruption. There are widespread reports, however, of traffic police soliciting bribes to forego issuing traffic tickets.

D. (S) ARE THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES PROFESSIONAL AND CAPABLE OF DETERRING TERRORIST ACTIONS? Yes.

The GOT maintains an active internal and modest external intelligence network focused on preserving civil peace and order within Tunisia's borders. Through extensive use of informants and surveillance, the GOT produces intelligence-related information and aggressively addresses any perceived threat to national security and regime stability.

In order to further combat domestic terrorism, the Ministry of Interior and Local Development (MOI) has centralized terrorism investigations in its Tunis office. The police and paramilitary National Guard divisions of the MOI have each established an antiterrorism director to coordinate terrorism investigations and share information more easily.

E. (S/NF) HAVE THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES BEEN COOPERATIVE WITH U.S. EMBASSY REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION AND SUPPORT?

Although the intelligence services continue to streamline their liaison decision-making processes, the GOT continues to impede dissemination of information outside of the GOT, even during a threat. In fact, internal controls within the GOT limit how information is shared between the office of the President, MOI, Security Services and MOD. From the outset of the MOI encounter with the terrorists in Hammam Lif (southeast suburban Tunis) on December 23, 2006 until the final confrontation in Soliman (farther southeast of Tunis) on January 3, 2007, the GOT did not/not share any information concerning the threat against the U.S. Embassy with anyone in the Embassy despite specific formal and informal requests from the Ambassador, DCM and other section heads.

Originally, they stated that the incident involved organized crime elements. On January 5, 2007, the GOT informed the Ambassador that the U.S. and U.K. Embassies were among the group's intended targets. One week later, the GOT made a public statement to that effect. Gradually, the GOT provided more specific information regarding these events. Through a concerted effort, relations and information sharing have improved but the majority of information originates from the U.S. side.

On criminal investigations, official requests to the MOI regarding information on criminal activities, specifically incidents against Americans continue to go unanswered or to be delayed. Criminal Leads have been passed with no response in years past. This does not necessarily mean that no action was taken, but no report or follow-up were shared with RSO.

Recently, the Legal Attach based in Rabat has had all requests for meetings canceled or postponed, even though multiple dates had been suggested in the Diplomatic Note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting the meetings. One letters rogatory requesting interviews with the FBI was granted in 2007.

F. (S/NF) ASSUMING THERE HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANT TERRORIST THREATS IN RECENT YEARS, HAVE HOST COUNTRY SECURITY SERVICES BEEN ABLE TO SCORE ANY MAJOR ANTI-TERRORISM SUCCESSES?

Beyond the December 2006/January 2007 incidents, the GOT has in some cases accepted repatriation of captured Tunisian extremists who face prosecution for violation of Tunisia's anti-terrorist laws. They are promptly sentenced upon their return. Two Guantanamo detainees were transferred in summer 2007 and ten more remain in custody there.

G. (SBU) HAS HOST COUNTRY BEEN RESPONSIVE (RE: TIMELINESS AND ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES) TO EMBASSY REQUESTS FOR PROTECTIVE SECURITY? Yes.

The GOT provided the Embassy with significant protective resources and security support for many high level visits in 2008, including the Secretary of State and several Congressional delegations. The GOT officers are professional and conscientious. Provided the request is scheduled in advance, the GOT provides assistance to include motorcade and traffic support, and also motorbike and foot patrols (uniform and undercover). When the Secretary of State stayed in a beach-front hotel, there were maritime patrols as well.

When demonstrations began occurring across the country in support of the Palestinians in January of 2009, the police presence at the Embassy was visibly increased even though the possibility of a spontaneous demonstration was extremely low.

We do not expect a change in the GOT's responsiveness to our requests for support.

H. (SBU) HOW DOES THE EMBASSY ASSESS THE OVERALL SECURITY AT MAJOR AIRPORTS IN THE COUNTRY? (EXCELLENT; VERY GOOD; GOOD/AVERAGE; POOR)

The Embassy would assess airport security as good/average.

The GOT is working to expand its airport services and hopes to be a major African hub; therefore the GOT has increased airport security overall. Numerous uniformed officers are positioned on the roadway in front of the main terminal and there are also checkpoints for traffic entering the terminal area.

The most recent information regarding airport safety available to the RSO is from 2007 when officials from the United Kingdom visited the Tunis/Carthage International Airport. The officials indicated that the security of the airport changed depending on the personnel on duty. Based on observations of our personnel this is considered accurate, as at times the police have ratcheted up their level of inspection of persons entering the airport without explanation.

Additionally, a number of visitors to Tunisia arrive via cruise ships. Since Tunisia is a popular destination for UK citizens, UK Department for Transport representatives visited the La Goulette commercial seaport, also in 2007. They determined the security at Tunis' major seaport to be good/average. They echoed the airport safety officials' 2007 statements in regards to the attentiveness of police personnel on site.

I. (S) HOW EFFECTIVE ARE CUSTOMS AND IMMIGRATION CONTROLS AGENCIES? (EFFECTIVE; AVERAGE; INEFFECTIVE)

Average. During a visit to the Port of Rades, Tunisia's Main container port, by CODEL Costello in August 2007, the Director General of the Merchant Marine and Ports Office (OMMP) and the OMMP's Director of Port Security and Safety noted that the Port is in full compliance with the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code and has been recognized for security best practices. The delegation was given a demonstration of the Port's container scanning procedures. The OMMP claimed that 100 percent of all imported and exported containers are scanned. The OMMP also shared photographic evidence of x-ray images that led to the GOT's interdiction of several smuggling incidents involving weapons, drugs, and illegal immigrants.

Immigration controls appear to be effective at international airports and we have no specific evidence to the contrary.

Land borders are considered porous. GOT security elements are specifically concerned about their western border with Algeria.

As stated above, Tunisia also faces illegal cross-border migration from Algeria and Libya to Europe. Criminal cartels continue to ferry illegal aliens through Tunisian territorial waters and are often intercepted by Tunisian naval/coast guard units and merchant vessels on their way to Italian islands. Tunisia is not typically the launching point, however.

J. (S/NF) HOW EFFECTIVE ARE BORDER PATROL FORCES? (EFFECTIVE; AVERAGE; INEFFECTIVE)

Average. The GOT continues to patrol its border areas with aging equipment although additional refurbished UH-1H helicopters have been received and put into service. There have been ten helicopters received since 2007. Its limited budget hinder the national guard's border patrol capabilities. The GOT continues to request US assistance in obtaining new equipment for this purpose, specifically helicopters, sensors, night vision goggles and spare parts.

Along the Algerian border north of the Sahara Desert, the paramilitary National Guard is stationed as a first line of defense with the army five kilometers inland for support.

The National Guard relies on static posts and both forces conduct continuous patrols. The army operates a small number of ground surveillance radars which provide limited coverage due to both their inadequate numbers and the age of the equipment. The military exclusively patrols the more porous southern Sahara borders with Algeria and Libya and relies on the same type of aged radar equipment. Security is often increased along the borders around major holidays.

Two Austrian nationals were kidnapped in February 2008 while visiting the southwestern desert. The GOT alleged they had strayed over the border into Algeria when they were abducted but subsequent debriefings since their release contradict that official explanation, leading us to believe the action took place in Tunisia. The Austrians were released unharmed in Mali after a large ransom was paid.

INDIGENOUS TERRORISM

4. (SBU) ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORIST GROUPS -----

A. (S/NF) ARE THERE INDIGENOUS, ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORIST GROUPS IN COUNTRY?

The group that targeted the Embassy is believed to be the linked to Al Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Based on publicized arrests and capture of Tunisian Islamic extremists involved in support and execution of extremist activities in Spain, Belgium, Italy, Bosnia, Denmark, Iraq and the trial of thirty terrorists allegedly planning domestic attacks, one must conclude there are further anti-American elements in Tunisia who support violence against the U.S. presence in Tunisia and Iraq.

The support of Islamic extremism appears to be linked to the global jihad movement. One alarming fact associated with the December 2006/January 2007 incidents indicates that the group of six who illegally entered Tunisia via the Algerian border in April 2006 was able to recruit over thirty more individuals for their cause in only six weeks.

In the past, Tunisian terrorist groups who were known to be active outside of Tunisia and who have espoused anti-American views, such as the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG aka Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group) and the Tunisian Islamic Front (TIF), may still have supporters in Tunisia although it is unlikely.

The GOT contends that these groups are totally shut down.

They are illegal and the GOT has arrested and imprisoned members.

Although the GOT does not publicly acknowledge their existence, it can be safely assumed that terrorists and terrorist sympathizers are present in Tunisia. It should also be noted that the GOT banned the Islamist party an-Nahdha (Renaissance), which it considers to be a terrorist organization. Several an-Nahdha leaders were sentenced to lengthy jail terms in the 1980s. Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of an-Nahdha, lives in exile in London.

B. (SBU) IF YES, HOW MANY? 3. PLEASE NAME GROUPS. See above

C. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS CARRIED OUT ANTI-AMERICAN ATTACKS WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS? No.

D. (SBU) WERE ANY OF THESE LETHAL ATTACKS? N/A

E. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS ATTACKED U.S. DIPLOMATIC TARGETS? No.

F. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS ATTACKED U.S. BUSINESS, U.S. MILITARY, OR U.S.-RELATED TARGETS? No.

G. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS LIMITED THEIR ATTACKS TO SPECIFIC REGIONS OR DO THEY OPERATE COUNTRY-WIDE? N/A

H. (SBU) IF ATTACKS ARE LIMITED TO REGIONS, ARE THERE ANY U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES LOCATED IN THESE REGIONS? N/A

5. (SBU) OTHER INDIGENOUS TERRORIST GROUPS

A. (SBU) ARE THERE OTHER INDIGENOUS TERRORIST GROUPS (NOT ANTI-AMERICAN) IN COUNTRY? None known.

B. (SBU) IF YES, HOW MANY? PLEASE NAME GROUPS. N/A

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C. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS CARRIED OUT ATTACKS IN THE CAPITAL OR IN AREAS WHERE U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES ARE LOCATED? No.

D. (SBU) WERE ATTACKS LETHAL AND/OR INDISCRIMINATE? N/A

E. (SBU) HAVE THERE BEEN ANY AMERICANS KILLED OR INJURED IN THESE ATTACKS? N/A

TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

6. (SBU) TRANSNATIONAL TERRORIST INDICTORS

A. (S/NF) ARE THERE ANY FOREIGN TERRORIST GROUP THAT HAVE A PRESENCE IN COUNTRY? Yes.

PROVID NAMES: AQIM and other pro-Islamic insurgent symathizers.

B. (S) HOW DOES POST ASSESS THIS PRESNCE? IS IT AN OPERATIONAL CELL? FINANCIAL CELL SUPPORT CELL? PROPAGANDA CELL?

Based on th direct threat against the Embassy mentioned abov and the presence of Tunisians actively participatng in terrorist activity around the world (i.e. adrid train bombings, Iraqi suicide attacks, Guatanamo detainees), operational, financial nd support cells exist in Tunisia.

Without specific evidence to the contrary, presence of propaganda cells can be assumed.

C. (C) IS THE HOST GOVERNMENT SYMPATHETIC TO THESE GROUPS?

No. The GOT actively pursues these groups, as they are a threat tothe current regime and its economic base - tourism.

D. (S) ARE THERE SUSPECT NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANZATIONS (NGOS) IN THE COUNTRY THAT HAVE A RELATINSHIP WITH ANY OF THESE GROUPS?

A popular, no-militant and influential NGO is the Da'Wa Al-Taligh. This Islamic NGO, which has been present in Tunisia since the mid-1970's, has been operating hroughout the countryside and in urban neighborhoods, urging strict observance of Koranic teachins. The Embassy suspects that sme elements of the Da'Wa may use this organization as a cover to recruit youths for extremist activities.

E. (SBU) ARE THERE ANY ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN COUNTRY THAT ARE SYMPATHETIC TO THESE GROUPS?

Yes, some Arab nationalists and Islamic sympathizers in Tunisia would support groups with radical Arab and Muslim causes.

F. (S/NF) HOW DOES POST ASSESS THE LEVEL, INTENT, AND SCOPE OF HOSTILE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES (IRAN, IRAQ, SYRIA, SERBIA, SUDAN, ET. AL.) IN COUNTRY RELATIVE TO POTENTIAL ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORIST ACTS?

Hostile intelligence services exist in Tunisia; however, it is difficult to assess their abilities. Their ability to conduct acts of terrorism or even conduct intelligence operations are constrained due to their limited resources and the strict covert and overt Tunisian surveillance against foreign missions.

G. (S/NF) HOW DOES POST ASSESS THE AVAILABILITY OF WEAPONS AND EXPLOSIVES IN COUNTRY OR FROM NEARBY COUNTRIES FOR HOSTILE TERRORIST ELEMENTS?

The GOT would argue that it has excellent control of information and intelligence that minimizes the ability of hostile groups to smuggle and transport weapons and explosives. The sandy desert borders shared with Algeria and Libya combined with the aging border patrol equipment provide an opportunity for entry of illegal munitions. GOT raids and encounters in December 2006 and January 2007 produced a variety of automatic weapons (Kalashnikovs) and explosive ordnance (ammonium nitrate, TATP). The GOT informed the U.S. Embassy that it found fifty to sixty kilograms of explosives fabricated in Tunisia. In 2007, to combat the fabrication of explosives in Tunisia, the GOT announced changes in the types of fertilizers that are permitted for use in country.

The support systems that produced and transported these weapons from the border regions throughout the country indicate that it is not as difficult as the GOT would have us believe. Further we cannot assume that the GOT has been able to seize all illegal weapons or explosives.

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2019
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PINR, TS
SUBJECT: BEN ALI'S SON-IN-LAW SAKHR EL-MATRI: A RISING FORCE IN TUNISIA (C-
NE8-01892)

REF: A. 08 STATE 97689
B. 08 TUNIS 847

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S/NF) Mohamed Sakhr El-Matri, the President's son-in-law, is viewed by many as a possible successor to President Ben Ali. Ref B reported his election to the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party's Central Committee in July 2008. Since his election to the Central Committee, however, he has not played up his political role.

He is also the head of the RCD's local organization in Carthage. Some observers here speculated that the Ben Ali family has instructed him to keep a low profile until after Ben Ali's expected re-election in October 2009. Instead, he has continued to focus on economic issues and expand his business empire, including pursuing opening a religious-themed TV station and a new Islamic bank both named Zeitouna, building on his Quranic radio station.

Bilateral Relations

2. (S/NF) The Ambassador met with El-Matri February 2, and found him willing to comment frankly on US-Tunisian relations and other issues. El-Matri said that, although bilateral relations are excellent, there are times when communication could be better. He mentioned that some GOT officials had fixed views that were difficult to change and that it was important for the RCD and the

government to bring younger people into the party and the government. He suggested that new channels of communication need to be developed and specifically cited the new RCD Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani. He also acknowledged that Tunisia needs to improve its performance on human rights.

3. (S/NF) On economic and trade issues, El-Matri expressed concern about the economic crisis, saying he was traveling to Dubai to discuss Emirate investment projects in Tunisia.

(Note: SAMA Dubai recently withdrew its Tunisian representative and their real estate development projects are reportedly on hold indefinitely.) He appreciated the work the Embassy had done to promote the US Generalized System of Preferences program and said he would ask the President of the employer's union UTICA to continue to publicize the program and its benefits. El-Matri also expressed interest in opening a McDonalds restaurant franchise. When the Ambassador said US companies needed a franchise law before investing, he responded, "that would not be a problem," and suggested a likely first option would be to open a franchise in the new cruise port he is developing in La Goulette.

El-Matri said he is working with a British bank to secure funding for his port expansion project. He also received permission from the Central Bank at the end of January 2009 to open an Islamic bank.

Personality and Family

4. (S/NF) Personally, El-Matri presented himself as self-confident, but low-key. This was in marked contrast to his reputation as a flamboyant and aggressive business mogul.

His reputation derives in part from the fact that he drives an Austin Martin and a Hummer among other cars, and rumors that he owns a pet tiger. With the Ambassador, he was equally comfortable talking about political issues and personal issues. He indicated his awareness of his relative youth vis-a-vis his position in the RCD and his business success, but did not seem uncomfortable with that reality.

He also discussed his wife Nesrine's commitment to using only organic products from the food they eat to the paint and varnish in their new mansion.

5. (C) With Tunisians, Sakhr El-Matri gets political credibility from his own family as well as by being the President's son-in-law. His grandfather, Dr. Mahmoud El-Matri, was a famous activist in the nationalist movement of the 1930s. His father was a military officer and was sentenced to life imprisonment for an attempted coup against Bourguiba in 1962. He was later pardoned by Bourguiba and is now a member of the Chamber of Advisors. Sakhr El-Matri and his father recently opened a shelter for cancer patients.

The El-Matri family is also prominent in business.

6. (C) El-Matri asked to work with the Embassy on the conservation of the cliff on which both the Ambassador's residence and his new mansion sit side-by-side. The Ambassador offered to share with him the Embassy's assessment of the cliff's stability.

Indicators of Sakhr El-Matri's Influence

7. (S/NF) Although Sakhr El-Matri holds two political positions as a member of the RCD Central Committee and the head of the RCD local organization in Carthage in the last year, he has not used these positions to raise political issues or his own profile. Given his relative youth and newness to the political game, some say he was put in these positions as a chance to establish his credentials and to build networks rather than to raise his public profile.

Others speculate that his family has told him to keep a low profile until after the 2009 presidential elections. He was given a prominent position on the podium with President Ben Ali during Ben Ali's annual November 7 speech celebrating his takeover from Bourguiba. Only one other of Ben Ali's four sons-in-law was also on the stage, Marouane Mabrouk. The El-Matri family also hosted Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi during his August 2008 visit to Tunisia and it was reported that El-Matri traveled to Libya to meet with al-Qadhafi beforehand. In addition to his Goulette Shipping Cruise line, El-Matri controls under the Princess El-Materi holding company the concessions for Audi, Volkswagen, Porsche, Renault cars and trucks; a pharmaceutical manufacturing company, Societe Adwia; and two real estate companies, Les Hirondelles and Le Marchand de l'Immobilier. (Note: The el-Materi holding company is spelled differently than the family name.)

Comment

8. (S/NF) Sakhr El-Matri comes across as someone who is in no rush but who is building his future both within the RCD and directly with the people through his Islamic radio and future bank. Unfortunately, along with his business dealings come a raft of rumors about corruption that make people cynical about his political intentions. At the very least, his business ventures thus far would not have been possible were it not for his close ties to President Ben Ali the First Tunisian family.

Godec

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S E C R E T TUNIS 001137

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STATE FOR NEA A/S WELCH AND L A/S BELLINGER

NEA ALSO FOR CRETZ, NEA/MAG:WILLIAMS, NARDI, PATTERSON,
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DRL:MCGEENEY, S/WCI:RICCI

DEFENSE FOR DOD/OSD:LIOTTA

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/03/2028

TAGS: PREL, PTER, PHUM, KDRG, TS

SUBJECT: (S) TUNISIAN GUANTANAMO DETAINEES: WHAT NEXT?

REF: A. TUNIS 1110

B. STATE 103775

C. STATE 91304 AND PREVIOUS

D. SECTO 8

E. TUNIS 1052

F. TUNIS 1007

G. TUNIS 992

H. TUNIS 973

I. TUNIS 193

J. TUNIS 042

K. 07 TUNIS 1483

L. 07 TUNIS 1060

M. 07 TUNIS 967

N. 07 TUNIS 964

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S/NF) Over the last two years, GOT officials have said Guantanamo detainees transferred to Tunisia will not be tortured or mistreated. President Ben Ali reiterated this "promise" to the Secretary in September. They have denied reports that one of the detainees transferred in 2007 was mistreated. The Embassy believes, however, the reports are credible. While GOT assurances offer some protection to future transferees, they are likely to face similar treatment. We do not believe further assurances from GOT officials will change this. While obtaining access to the first two transferees may remind some GOT officials of their obligations regarding treatment, we are unlikely to get information we do not already have. If Washington agencies wish to pursue access, we believe a telephone call from the Secretary to President Ben Ali will be necessary. Our conclusion: we are at the end of the road regarding assurances from the GOT. Now we must decide whether to transfer more detainees or seek another course. End Summary.

2006-2007: GOT Assurances

2. (S/NF) From late 2006 to mid-2007, the US Government received a variety of assurances from the GOT regarding the transfer of Tunisian detainees at Guantanamo. In November 2006, the Ministers of Justice and Interior offered oral assurances about Tunisia's obligations under the Convention Against Torture and noted to an interagency delegation led by S/WCI Ambassador Williamson that many of the detainees faced in absentia charges. The Minister of Justice also provided oral assurances about third party access (i.e., the ICRC) to detainees in the Tunisian prison system. In 2007, Minister of State and Presidential Advisor Ben Dhia confirmed these assurances to the Ambassador and subsequently reiterated them in a letter to Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte. The exchanges paved the way for the June 2007 transfer of the first two detainees to GOT custody.

Reports of Mistreatment

3. (S/NF) Following the transfer, NGOs alleged that the two detainees, Abdallah Ben Omar (al-Hajji) and Lotfi Ben Swei Lagha, had been tortured and mistreated by GOT security forces. As a result of the allegations, the Ambassador demarched Foreign Minister Abdallah, Minister of Interior Belhaj Kacem and Presidential Advisor Ben Dhia regarding GOT assurances. (Note: The GOT declined to facilitate a meeting for the Ambassador with Minister of Justice Tekkari. End note.) All reiterated that Tunisia is a signatory of the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and would respect it.

Abdallah and Kacem dismissed the allegations of torture. To our knowledge, there was no GOT investigation into reports of the detainees' mistreatment. Further, the ministers did not indicate that any future transfers will be handled differently to avoid such accusations.

4. (S/NF) Ben Omar's lawyer (the source of these NGO reports) later clarified that, while Ben Omar was mistreated (slapped) and threatened (that he and his family members would be raped), he was not "tortured." Post received reports that Ben Omar has been subject to psychological mistreatment, including most recently on September 8 when Emboffs met with his family. Our assessment remains that these claims of mistreatment are credible. According to the same lawyer,

who represents both detainees, and his own brother, Ben Swei Lagha has not been subject to any mistreatment although he was reportedly held in solitary confinement for weeks after his transfer. Emboffs met with Lagha's brother September 8.

2008: New GOT Assurances

5. (S/NF) In February 2008, NEA A/S David Welch met with President Ben Ali and asked for his commitment to accept the Tunisian detainees still in Guantanamo. Ben Ali responded that the GOT would accept the detainees and do so on the basis of the Tunisian constitution. (NB. The Tunisian constitution offers guarantees on human rights, humane treatment, and respect for international commitments.) On August 30, the Ambassador delivered a new letter from the Deputy Secretary to Ben Dhia. Ben Dhia's written reply consisted of sending a copy of the letter he wrote in 2007 before the return of the two detainees already transferred.

6. (S/NF) On September 6, Secretary Rice asked Ben Ali for his personal assurances that the Tunisians transferred from Guantanamo would be treated humanely. Ben Ali:
-- said the detainees have no reason to fear torture in Tunisia,
-- affirmed they are not being tortured, and that there would be no abuse or mistreatment of them,
-- offered to allow US officials to visit the transferees in prison.

7. (S/NF) Following the Secretary's visit, the Embassy requested permission to visit the two transferees in Tunisia.

MFA officials told the Ambassador September 24 that Ben Ali had not offered to allow US officials to visit the transferees and that it was against Tunisian law for anyone other than the family and lawyers to meet with Tunisian prisoners. A/S Welch asked FM Abdallah on September 27 to raise the question of US access with Ben Ali. Abdallah told the Ambassador October 18 that access would not be allowed and that Ben Ali had given the Secretary his "promise" there would be no mistreatment. Abdallah said that even a "discreet visit" would be pointless since the purpose of access would be to assuage NGO and public opinion. He said, however, he would raise the question "again" with Ben Ali.

Next Steps

8. (S/NF) In our view, there are two questions before Washington agencies. First, should we continue to press for access to the detainees already in Tunisia? While access may remind some GOT officials of their obligations regarding the detainees, we consider it unlikely that a visit will provide us with information that we have not already obtained from their relatives and lawyer. If Washington wishes to pursue access, we have these options:

-- The Ambassador or NEA A/S Welch could approach FM Abdallah again and ask if he has talked with Ben Ali to confirm whether the President would permit US access to the transferees.
-- If the answer is delayed or access continues to be denied, then the Secretary would need to telephone Ben Ali. We doubt that a letter would result in any change in position.

9. (S/NF) Second, should we accept Tunisian assurances and transfer additional detainees? There are three key points.

-- Over the last two years, the United States has received many GOT assurances that Guantanamo detainees would not be tortured or mistreated and would be treated in accordance with the Tunisian constitution. The most important of these assurances is also the newest, from Ben Ali to the Secretary.

We believe these assurances offer some protection to transferred detainees.

-- Despite the early GOT commitments, it is likely that Ben Omar was mistreated. While GOT officials deny the reports, this is clear: in no case has a GOT official acknowledged that if Ben Omar had been threatened or slapped it would have been wrong. Indeed, the most frequent response has been to emphasize that the detainees deserve to be in prison. Given this, and despite Ben Ali's statements, we believe future transferees are likely to face treatment similar to the first two.

-- Finally, we have obtained all we can from the GOT by way of assurances on the treatment of transferees. In recent exchanges, GOT officials are increasingly testy and difficult. The risk of a counterproductive response is growing. We are at the end of the road on Tunisian assurances. Now we must decide whether to transfer more detainees or seek another course.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>

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**STATE FOR S/CT - NELSON; NEA/MAG - WILLIAMS, NARDI AND
STEWART;
NSC FOR YERGER**

**E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/02/2018
TAGS: PTER, ASEC, PREL, TS
SUBJECT: TUNISIA: NINETEEN CONVICTED IN TERRORISM TRIALS**

REF: A. TUNIS 827

- B. TUNIS 168
- C. TUNIS 79
- D. TUNIS 78
- E. TUNIS 75

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Nineteen Tunisians have been convicted of varying degrees of involvement in terror planning in two separate trials in the past two weeks. One of the defense attorneys who represented clients in both cases offered his assessment that a few of those convicted had indeed intended to carry out attacks in Tunisia. It was not clear they had the means, however. He said most of the defendants were innocent, but were considered by the state to be guilty by association. He complained that no material evidence had been presented against the accused. These cases are the latest in a steady stream of trials under Tunisia's 2003 anti-terror legislation and are part of a spike in caseload as a result of sweeps following the GOT's take-down of the "Soliman" cell in December 2006-January 2007. End Summary.

19 Convictions in Terror Cases; Caseload Continues Apace

2. (SBU) The Tunis Court of First Instance in two separate trials sentenced nineteen Tunisians on various counts under Tunisia's 2003 anti-terror legislation. Their sentences ranged from two to eight years in prison.

-- In the first case, thirteen Tunisians were sentenced on August 23 to belonging to a terrorist organization in Tunisia and planning to carry out terrorist attacks in the country.

Some members of this group were also charged with trying to dispatch "jihadists" to Lebanon.

-- On August 18 the same court convicted six defendants of attempting to establish a terrorist camp to train fighters to go to Iraq. One of the six was said to have been caught returning to Tunisia from Algeria.

3. (C) Tunisia has seen a steady stream of anti-terror cases since the passage of its 2003 anti-terrorism legislation.

According to defense attorneys, there has been a surge in such cases in recent months. This is because the large numbers of arrests in the aftermath of the December 2006-January 2007 GOT takedown of the "Soliman" terror cell are now coming to fruition (see Refs C-E). (Note: It usually takes between nine months and two years for a terrorism case to be heard in court.) One highly sought after defense lawyer said that he has on average one such case per day.

The Defense Perspective: A Few Intended to Carry Out Terrorist Acts

4. (S) In a August 29 conversation with Pol/EconCouns, Samir Ben Amor (protect), counsel to several of the defendants in these cases, offered his assessment that some of those accused in these two most recent cases did indeed have the intention of carrying out the acts for which they were convicted. He said that these men would describe themselves as adherents to the Salafi school of Islam. He indicated that these ringleaders had links with those who had been involved in the December 2006-January 2007 "Soliman" terror cell (Ref B). Most of these 19 defendants, however, had not been directly involved. Rather, he said, many had been unwitting associates. To illustrate his point, he noted that when police arrest one suspect, they then review all incoming and outgoing calls to his cell phone and sweep up everyone with whom the suspect had been in contact. Family members, he continued, are often considered guilty by association. He said in the second case, there was just one individual who in 2004 conceived the plan to recruit jihadists to fight in Iraq and establish a training camp to prepare them. The rest of those convicted had rejected these recruitment efforts. In the interim, they had gone on to live productive lives, with some getting married. They were found guilty of failing to notify the authorities that they had been targeted for recruitment.

Irregularities in the Process

5. (C) Ben Amor charged that there were several irregularities in the handling of these two most recent cases. First, the defendants had had access to lawyers, he said, but the lawyers had not been given enough time to properly prepare for trial. In addition, the defendants in the first case were not even interrogated during their trial.

In neither trial, he said, did the prosecutors present any material evidence against the accused. He noted that none of the three judges who hear terror-related cases in the Tunis Court of First Instance enforce the protection of the defendants' legal guarantees. He has filed appeals in both cases and expects that they will be heard in two to four months.

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A Lawyer's Insight Into What's Behind this Trend
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6. (C) Ben Amor said that he has seen a shift in his clients' attitudes and motives over the past several years. (See also Refs C-E.) In 2003-2004, he said, there was a lot more talk about volunteering to fight in Iraq, Palestine, or Afghanistan. In the past couple of years, however, there has been a greater tendency to sign up for "jihad" in Tunisia.

Ben Amor attributed this shift to several factors: young men feel marginalized in Tunisia; if they have grievances, there is no one for them to bring them to. They also complain of injustice. He said the security services' harassment of observant Muslims had been a key motivating factor for several clients. In particular, he said, they objected to the GOT's campaign against women wearing the Islamic veil.

He also noted that the defendant who had been caught returning to Tunisia from Algeria explained that he had gone to live there after marrying a second wife, since polygamy is illegal in Tunisia. On a more practical level, Ben Amor said, it has become much more difficult for would-be jihadists to leave the country; the borders are better patrolled. Finally, Ben Amor assessed that al-Qaeda's strategy of developing multiple fronts to "distract" the Americans and US-sympathizers had gained traction.

Comment

7. (C) Ben Amor estimated that between 1,000-2,000 Tunisians have been arrested on terrorism related charges since the passage in 2003 of comprehensive anti-terror legislation.

According to his assessment, only a small fraction belong in jail. As he put it, "Tunisia has many so-called 'terrorists' but there have been no acts of terrorism." In its haste to neutralize a serious threat, the GOT is trampling the rights of the accused, such as by allowing such cases to be prosecuted on the basis of flimsy, or no, material evidence.

As a result, it risks damaging what little credibility the justice system has. It also risks enflaming the sense of injustice, which Ben Amor identified as a widely held motivating factor for those who have embraced violent extremism. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 TUNIS 000962

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STATE FOR S, S/ES, NEA AND NEA/MAG FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2018

TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PTER, PMIL, PHUM, TS

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE SECRETARY'S VISIT TO TUNISIA

Summary

1. (C) Madame Secretary, my team and I look forward to your visit to Tunis. President Ben Ali and Foreign Minister Abdallah are delighted you are coming and will provide a warm welcome. They will want to hear your thoughts on regional issues and to reaffirm strong US-Tunisian relations. For us, your visit is an opportunity to welcome Tunisia's moderation and its economic and social progress. We recommend you stress the value of our excellent, long-standing ties, but add that more is possible. If the Tunisians make progress on US concerns, we would be ready to respond in ways that address Tunisian interests.

2. (C) Specifically, your visit will allow you to:

- welcome Tunisia's moderate positions on key regional priorities while seeking greater GOT engagement;
- commend recent progress on counterterrorism cooperation, but urge further steps;
- ask Ben Ali for assurances on humane treatment for past and future detainees transferred from Guantanamo;
- underscore the need for more political reform against the backdrop of Tunisia's 2009 presidential and legislative elections; and,
- offer the GOT an additional \$4.1 million in military assistance that will help in the fight against terrorism.

End Summary.

Background

3. (C) Tunisia styles itself "a country that works". Ben Ali and other Tunisian leaders often contrast their successes with the problems elsewhere in the region. There is much in what they say. While Tunisians grumble privately about corruption by the First Lady's family, there is an abiding appreciation for Ben Ali's success in steering his country clear of the instability and violence that have plagued Tunisia's neighbors. Recent events have underscored this accomplishment and the continuing threat: Tunisian security forces took down a terror cell in December 2006-January 2007; we were reportedly among the group's targets. In late February, al-Qaeda in the lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) kidnapped two Austrian tourists who were in the desert along the Tunisian-Algerian border.

4. (C) Tunisians also widely recognize, and welcome, the country's social successes. Tunisia is a model for the region on women's rights; its 1956 Personal Status Code abolished polygamy and required consent for marriage, among other protections. Women today play an important role in the public and private sectors.

5. (C) There is also real economic progress. GDP growth has averaged five percent over the past decade, and the Tunisian people enjoy a relatively high standard of living. About 80 percent of Tunisians are considered middle class, and live in family-owned homes. Notwithstanding the progress, unemployment remains very high, officially estimated at 14 percent. But it is generally

acknowledged to be higher in certain regions and much higher in the 20-30 age bracket, particularly among university graduates. The average Tunisian's purchasing power is under pressure due to world commodity price increases. These strains have manifested themselves most acutely through protests and arrests in the southern mining basin of Gafsa province. The GOT responded with a very heavy show of force.

6. (C) In the political arena, however, progress is barely perceptible. Ben Ali announced recently that he would be running for a fifth term in Tunisia's next elections, most likely in October, 2009. There is no chance the elections will be free or fair; freedom of expression and freedom of association are severely constrained, and independent opposition parties are not allowed to operate effectively.

Indeed, one authentic opposition candidate is no longer eligible to run, due to a recent constitutional amendment.

When asked about political freedom, Ben Ali will insist the GOT is making progress, but that it takes time. He may point to such steps as the lifting of the prior review of books and newspapers. While welcome, the GOT has often found ways to limit the impact of such advances.

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President Ben Ali and Foreign Minister Abdallah

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7. (C) President Ben Ali will welcome your visit and meeting. He will wish to spend much time on regional issues, including developments in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran and Mauritania. He may also emphasize, as he has done in other recent discussions, that US-Tunisian political ties are strong, but that we should do more to deepen our economic links. If Ben Ali is "on his game," he will be affable, open and engaged. Ben Ali will have just turned 72, however. He reportedly has health problems and they may affect the quality and tenor of the meeting.

8. (C) Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah is delighted that you are coming. He speaks fondly of his previous interactions with you, including during his June, 2007 visit to Washington and at the Annapolis Conference. Abdallah can be charming in meetings, but he rarely departs from standard GOT talking points. He has been known to open his meetings with lengthy soliloquies about Tunisia's political, social, and economic successes and moderate positions on regional issues. This is the spin that Abdallah himself crafted during his years as Presidential Advisor responsible for domestic media control and international media spin. During his three-year tenure as Foreign Minister, Abdallah has maintained significant influence -- if not control -- over the local media.

International/Regional Issues

9. (C) Tunisia is like-minded on Iran, recognizes the importance of restoring stability in Iraq before the Coalition departs, and backs the Annapolis negotiations on the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The GOT has maintained its Embassy in Iraq with a Charge d'Affaires, and has provided some training to GOI officials. However, the GOT assiduously avoids getting out in front of the Arab

League consensus on most foreign policy issues. Moreover, when other interests are at stake, the GOT is prone to waffle.

Ben Ali surprised us by attending the Arab League summit in Damascus this spring, after telling A/S Welch that he would not go.

10. (C) It is not clear that the GOT has a guiding principle for its foreign policy other than to "get along with everyone." The GOT has declined to condemn publicly the coup d'etat in Mauritania, although it has signaled its private objection. Likewise, it has been silent on Russia's recent military actions in Georgia. To the extent that GOT leaders speak in generalities about their moderate foreign policy stance, we remind them that Tunisia's moderation does not help us, unless its views are made public and its influence is used actively in international fora.

Guantanamo Detainees

11. (S) Based on humane treatment and security assurances provided by the GOT, the United States transferred two Guantanamo detainees in June, 2007. Following the transfer, credible allegations surfaced that one of the detainees was mistreated while in Ministry of Interior custody (slapped and threatened with rape as well as the rape of his wife and daughter). In February, A/S Welch raised the return of detainees with Ben Ali. Ben Ali provided the somewhat vague response that they would be accepted in accordance with the Tunisian Constitution. Your visit represents an opportunity to confirm that past and future transferees will be treated in accordance with Tunisia's constitutional guarantees on human rights and humane treatment, as well as its international commitments, notably the Convention Against Torture.

Counterterrorism/Security Cooperation

12. (C) Tunisian officials are rightfully concerned about the terrorism threat posed by violent extremists. As Tunisians often tell us, they "live in a bad neighborhood". Indeed, the core members of the terror cell the GOT took down in January, 2007 had infiltrated from Algeria. But the cell then recruited from the local population, mushrooming from four to 40 people in just six weeks. The GOT's success in taking down the group was welcome, but there is clearly some support for extremist ideologies among Tunisians. We would like to help the GOT deal with this, but it would require the GOT to admit there is a domestic problem, and to share knowledge about its extent. That is not happening: the GOT maintains that the threat of terrorism in Tunisia is due to external factors, whether border infiltrations or incitement broadcast on pan-Arab satellite TV.

13. (S/NF) Tunisian cooperation in the intelligence arena has been uneven. On the positive side, we have some successful programs being run through GRPO. We also have good intelligence sharing on Tunisians who are outside the country. On the negative side, however, intelligence sharing on the threat inside Tunisia is thin, although it has improved somewhat in recent months. The improvements are probably in response to a commitment made by President Ben Ali to A/S Welch in February to cooperate on counterterrorism "without reservation."

14. (C) The GOT places a high value on its historic and robust military-military relationship with us. In FY 2008, Tunisia is receiving approximately \$8 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF),

nearly all of which is used for maintenance of its aging of US-origin equipment, which needs major upgrades. In addition to FMF, the Mission received almost \$10 million in Section 1206 funding in FY 2008. We are using the funding to provide the Tunisian military with night-vision goggles and ground surveillance radar. We also have a robust program of military exercises and training with the Tunisians.

15. (C) You will be able to inform the GOT that we can provide \$4.1 million in Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) funds (originally intended for Mauritania) to meet GOT requests for unmanned aerial vehicles, night vision equipment for Tunisia's UH-1H helicopters, and associated training. The Administration has proposed approximately \$2 million in FMF in FY 2009 for Tunisia. GOT leaders view FMF as a barometer of the US commitment to Tunisia, and thus have complained about cuts in FMF levels in recent years. We have told them that we continue to seek ways to help their military combat the threat of regional terrorism. We have traded texts on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), but the GOT has not replied to our latest draft delivered over a year ago. In a meeting with Minister of Defense Morjane in May, Secretary Gates noted the United States would like to complete a SOFA with Tunisia.

Economic Ties

16. (C) Ben Ali and other Tunisian officials frequently call for greater US economic engagement, by which they mean more investment. Today, some 70 US companies are operating in Tunisia, with close to \$1 billion in investment since 1994.

Trade between the two countries remains small, with agricultural commodities the largest US export to Tunisia.

In March, we held a meeting of our Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) council and discussed intellectual property, services, market access, and investment. One key to improving US trade and investment is a further opening up of Tunisia's economy. Notably, Tunisia still does not permit most types of franchising, although they are working on a new services law.

Bilateral Engagement

17. (C) While we enjoy a long-standing and generally positive bilateral relationship with Tunisia, difficulties remain.

The GOT is slow to engage, often unresponsive, and periodically takes counterproductive steps. Most recently, the GOT rejected all nine American Fulbright Scholars planning study here this coming year. Strong reclamation resulted in the GOT accepting four scholars, but the process was tough. Underlying some GOT actions is a distrust of our motives, and specifically the Freedom Agenda. GOT leaders bristle at public criticism. For example, Abdallah convoked me to express his "disgust" that Tunisia was condemned for its treatment of journalists in President Bush's May 1 statement on World Press Freedom. But the difficulties are also the result of the controls imposed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These controls limit the Embassy's ability to engage with other agencies, and with universities, business organizations and even the country's labor union.

While these restrictions affect all Embassies, not just ours, the effect is to limit the quality and depth of our relations.

18. (C) In our contacts with Tunisian officials, they emphasize our strong ties of over 200 years. But they rarely move from the general to the specific. Your visit is an opportunity to make clear that more is possible. If Tunisia is prepared to open up and do more on issues of concern to the United States, e.g., regional challenges and/or political liberalization, we are prepared to look for ways to deepen our relationship.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000568

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/28/2018

TAGS: EFIN, EINV, KCOR, TS

SUBJECT: BEN ALI, INC. TAKES OVER A BANK

REF: A. TUNIS 365

B. 07 TUNIS 1433

C. 06 TUNIS 1673
D. 06 TUNIS 1672
E. 06 TUNIS 1630
F. 06 TUNIS 1622

TUNIS 00000568 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons. 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (S) In the latest in a long string of questionable business deals, the Ben Ali clan has recently entered the banking business, assuming leadership of Tunisia's most profitable private bank -- Banque de Tunisie (BT). In April, Alya Abdallah, wife of Foreign Minister Abdelwahab Abdallah, became President of BT, replacing Faouzi Bel Kahia, the highly respected banker who held the post for 16 years.

According to an Embassy banking contact, Bel Kahia was forcibly removed to create an opening for Abdallah. Since taking office, Abdallah has replaced three members of the board -- two of them former ministers -- with insiders such as Belhassen Trabelsi, the President's brother-in-law and oft-cited as the ringleader behind Ben Ali clan corruption (Refs C, D, E, F). Abdallah also canceled a decision taken by shareholders to increase the number of shares. BT shares have fallen nearly 25 percent since the changes. End Summary.

Mrs. Abdallah's Power Play

2. (S) Alya Abdallah, wife of Foreign Minister Abdelwahab Abdallah, was appointed President of Banque de Tunisie (BT) in April, replacing Faouzi Bel Kahia, the highly respected banker who held the post for 16 years. Abdallah was officially nominated by the board of directors and her position will be ratified by BT shareholders at the next general assembly. BT is Tunisia's most profitable and best managed private bank. While most Tunisian banks remain saddled with non-performing loans, BT's assets are strong and 2007 net profits are expected to be in the neighborhood of 160 million dinars. Although Abdallah comes to BT from her position as chairman of the board at Union Internationale de Banque (UIB -- majority-owned by Societe Generale), Embassy contacts are quick to point out she is not qualified for either position.

3. (S) Prior to UIB, Abdallah's only banking experience was as the head of human resources at state-owned Societe Tunisienne de Banque (STB). As one contact, a former bank chairman himself, complained, "she has never been a banker and has no financial experience." Abdallah's tenure at UIB is reported to have been rocky, with stories of shouting matches between Abdallah and the French General Manager.

According to the former bank chairman, Abdallah asked Central Bank Governor Taoufik Baccar to get rid of the GM. The GM was asked to leave the country, which he did. Abdallah then asked Baccar for a new position, with her sights on Banque de Tunisie's presidency.

Out With the Old...

4. (S) Although BT and former president Bel Kahia enjoy excellent reputations in the Tunisian banking community, several factors made BT ripe for takeover. BT is fully private, but held by numerous small shareholders, with the largest stakeholder -- French Industrial and Commercial Credit (CIC) -- holding only 20 percent of the bank. Faouzi Bel Kahia is reportedly suffering from multiple sclerosis.

Although Bel Kahia's illness provided this opening, rumors indicate and an Embassy contact in the industry confirmed that Bel Kahia was pushed out. Bel Kahia had wanted to stay through the bank's General Assembly, during which BT's stellar 2007 profits will be reported. According to this contact, Bel Kahia was visited twice by Baccar: during the first visit Bel Kahia pleaded to stay, but during the second visit Baccar told him he was out, to which Bel Kahia is reported to have responded with tears. The contact noted that the level of the governor's intervention in this situation was unprecedented. Bel Kahia was rumored to have chosen a successor, who had already been approved by the board. While not currently involved in politics, Bel Kahia is a friend of the regime, serving previously as Minister of Transport and Director General of state-owned Tunisair.

Since assuming her new position, Abdallah has removed three members of the board -- Abderrazak Rasaa, former Deputy Minister of Finance, Ilyes Jouini, Professor at Dauphine University in Paris, and Tijani Chelli, a former Minister of Public Works, Minister of Telecommunications and Minister of Economy,

In With the New

5. (S) Although the departure of three notable board members is a surprise, it was one replacement in particular that drew the attention, and ire, of the Tunisian business community.

Abdallah named Belhassen Trabelsi, the President's brother-in-law and widely believed to be the key player in Ben Ali clan corruption, to the bank's board of directors and also to the credit committee. Trabelsi has reportedly been involved in a wide range of corruption schemes -- with stories ranging from him setting up shop in a gas station across from the airport to facilitate customs shipments in return for large bribes and to expropriating property at will from hapless homeowners. In February, Trabelsi began buying huge numbers of BT shares (20,000 a day), drawing attention to his interest in the bank. His current stake in BT is unknown. In addition to Trabelsi, Lotfi Hamrouni, chairman of the Hamrouni Group, and Ali Bakir, SFBT (Tunis Refrigeration and Brewing Company) -- Tunisia's Coca-Cola bottler, were named to the board.

6. (S) In addition to changing the composition of the board, Abdallah cancelled a communique issued by the shareholders prior to her arrival. The shareholders signed a Pacte d'Actionnaires to double their shares and increase bank capital. The former banker characterized the pacte as an effort by shareholders to protect their influence within the bank. BT shares have fallen 25 percent since Abdallah cancelled the communique. The former bank chairman noted that control of BT is a

significant boon to the family, giving them a financial tool at their disposal with which they can acquire and finance new ventures. As such, bank performance is a secondary concern.

Comment

7. (S) Tunisia's financial sector is already plagued by high-levels of non-performing loans, many of which are a result of corrupt banking practices. Belhassen Trabelsi's position on any bank board, or credit committee, would be significant cause for concern. In the case of BT, his participation jeopardizes the integrity of Tunisia's premiere banking institution. Moreover, the Central Bank Governor's involvement in this scenario casts doubt on his ability or willingness to serve as an independent actor. Serious efforts at banking sector reform were just dealt a heavy blow.

8. (S) Tunisians are unable to complain publicly, but do so loudly in private about crony capitalism and ill-gotten gains. Rumors of familial corruption have become widespread in Tunisia, with Banque de Tunisie just one of many examples.

Despite their frustration, many Tunisians are quick to absolve Ben Ali of any direct responsibility and lay the blame squarely on the Trabelsis. Yet, claims that he is unaware of the situation strain credibility. GOT insiders and the President's extended family are reaping the benefits from Ben Ali's continued reign, but in doing so have undermined the effectiveness and credibility of the government. Even if the money is not flowing into Ben Ali's bank account, he bears responsibility for what happens on his watch. The economic impact is clear, with Tunisian investors fearing the long-arm of the family -- forgoing new investments, keeping domestic investment rates low and unemployment high (Refs A, B). Faced with high unemployment and high prices, Tunisians are simultaneously confronted with obvious corruption and conspicuous displays of wealth. The frustration is palpable, but it appears there is no end in sight. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm> GODEC

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**OSD-ISA FOR ASD VERSHBOW AND DASD HUDDLESTON
AFRICOM FOR AMBASSADOR HOLMES AND MG SHERLOCK
JOINT STAFF J5 FOR COL SALCEDO**

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2020

TAGS: MARR, PREL, TS

**SUBJECT: TUNISIAN DEFENSE MINISTER GRIRA LOOKING FORWARD TO
JMC**

REF: A. TUNIS 85

B. TUNIS 81 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary and Recommendation

1. (C) In the course of a February 8 courtesy call on newly-appointed Defense Minister Grira, the Ambassador reviewed the historically close cooperation between the U.S. and Tunisian militaries; stressed the need to expand military engagement and cooperation in light of the threat posed by terrorism and especially AQIM;

and underscored the need for substantive discussions of Tunisia's strategic vision, defense strategy, military posture, and the role of U.S. security assistance and cooperation within that strategy at the upcoming Annual Planning Conference and Joint Military Commission (JMC). Minister Grira demonstrated knowledge of U.S. assistance programs and expressed his desire to expand engagement. Executing the JMC as a counterpart visit Will significantly enhance the potential for increased military-to-military engagement with Tunisia. End summary and recommendation.

Positive Meeting with Defense Minister Grira

2. (C) On February 8, Ambassador Gray paid a courtesy call on newly-appointed Tunisian Defense Minister Ridha Grira. Also in attendance were Colonel Major Mohamed Ghorbel, Director of International Relations and Cooperation;

Captain Major Mohamed Khammasi, International Relations Officer on the Defense Minister's Cabinet; and the U.S.

Senior Defense Official/Defense Attache. Welcoming the Ambassador, Defense Minister Grira opened with the observation that terrorism affects all countries, not just Tunisia. He noted that Tunisia has a long history since the 1950s of combating the roots of terrorism through social

development programs for the population and especially through education. He then stressed the need for our two countries to cooperate and to share intelligence and information, noting that Tunisia can benefit greatly from the U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Turning Positive Relations into Increased Engagement

3. (C) The Ambassador recalled the tradition of cooperation between our countries and militaries and stressed that the relationship is important to us, especially our cooperation against a shared terrorist threat. He went on to express our interest in expanding the exercise program, noting particularly the need to conduct exercises outside of the Cap Serrat training area. Considering that the primary threat is posed by AQIM and terrorism in the Trans-Sahel, the Ambassador pointed to the benefit for both militaries in training in the Sahara regions of Tunisia. The Defense Minister interrupted by saying "absolutely."

4. (C) The Ambassador went on to stress that it is important to plan our joint activities and exercises over the next three years, and that the upcoming Annual Planning Conference provides the best opportunity for that joint planning.

The Defense Minister agreed, noting that while the terrorism problem is regional, threatening not just Tunisia, we can profit by sharing experience and knowledge. He noted that it is the same for maritime operations.

Intelligence Cooperation

5. (S/NF) The Ambassador continued by noting the importance of exchanging intelligence and expressed his appreciation for the participation of the Deputy Director of Military Security and two analysts in the recent analyst seminar hosted by the AFRICOM Intelligence and Knowledge Development (IKD) Directorate at Molesworth, England. He shared his hopes that the Tunisian Director General of Military Security would be participating in the upcoming Directors of Military Intelligence Conference and a counterpart visit with the Director of AFRICOM IKD. The Defense Minister replied "with pleasure" and then reiterated the importance of security cooperation between out countries, noting that U.S. collaboration and recently provided equipment have increased Tunisia's security capacity.

Segue to the JMC and Substantive Dialogue

6. (C) Building on the Defense Minister's comments, the Ambassador said that the U.S. wants to continue to support Tunisian security, but pointed to the severe pressure on the U.S. budget caused by the global economic crisis. The Executive Branch must be able to justify its requests for foreign assistance to Congress, the Ambassador explained.

Officials from the Pentagon, the Department of State, and the U.S. military would benefit from an in-depth explanation of Tunisia's defense strategy at the upcoming Joint Military Commission (JMC) meeting. Continuing, the Ambassador detailed the need for substantive discussion to justify

continued support for, and engagement with, Tunisia. In particular, it will be important that Tunisia present its strategic vision, outline whom it sees as its primary enemies, explain how it is arming against that enemy, and discuss current and long term defense strategies for both the military and each of the services. The Defense Minister, nodding, replied "absolutely".

7. (C) The Ambassador continued with the request that discussion at the JMC include how engagement with the U.S.

and American security assistance fit into its strategic and military plans, and Tunisia's vision of (and willingness to) engage in regional cooperation. He provided a non-paper with a number of questions he explained would be of great interest to U.S. participants at the JMC, and said that the U.S. would like to begin addressing these issues at the Annual Planning Conference in March. The Defense Minister replied "no problem" and then stated the need to get together before the JMC. The Defense Minister accepted the letter of invitation to the April 27-29 JMC "with pleasure" and also indicated he would be amenable to traveling to Wyoming to accept a possible invitation from the Governor for an April 30 meeting.

Historic Relationship

8. (C) The Defense Minister observed that, unlike other Arab nations, Tunisia has always held the same position and has always made the same choice, which has been to ally itself with the U.S. Never did Tunisia ever side with the countries of the Warsaw Pact or buy weapons from them - only the U.S. and the West. Recognizing our long and supportive relationship, the Ambassador thanked the Minister for his support during the recent visit of the AFRICOM Deputy to the Commander for Civil Military Activities, Ambassador Holmes.

Comment and Recommendation on Next Steps

9. (C) This introductory call provided a good opportunity to deliver the message to the new Defense Minister that U.S. engagement requires substantive dialogue by, and cooperation from, Tunisia. Minister Grira's comments reinforce recent indications that the Government of Tunisia is seeking to improve bilateral relations with the U.S. (ref A). Particularly noteworthy was Grira's receptivity to conducting exercises in the Sahara region, his desire to work with the U.S. military to benefit from our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, and his understanding of the FMF, 1206, and Excess Defense Articles programs.

10. (C) The USG should reinforce these themes at the Annual Planning Conference in March, and then again when the Ambassador meets with the Defense Minister before the JMC. Conducting the April 2010 JMC as a counterpart visit would greatly enhance the potential for increased military-to-military engagement with Tunisia, and would provide us with a significant opportunity to influence this influential Cabinet member (ref B) relatively early in this tenure.

End comment and recommendation.

GRAY

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/15/2020
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PINR, MARR, TU
SUBJECT: BEN ALI'S JANUARY 14 CABINET SHUFFLE IS A NOD TO
THE U.S., BUT NOT A STRATEGIC REVERSAL

REF: A. TUNIS 26
B. TUNIS 25
C. 09 TUNIS 834
D. 09 TUNIS 792

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) This is an action message. Please see paragraph four.

Summary

2. (C) The main feature of President Ben Ali's January 14 shuffle of his cabinet is continuity, combined with an apparent intent to recalibrate (to what extent remains unclear) Tunisia's relationship with the U.S., which has stagnated in recent years. Our recommendations on initial steps the U.S. should take are in paragraph four. The replacement of Abdelwahab Abdellah, a dour francophone who oversaw the Foreign Ministry's expansion of restrictions on Embassy Tunis activities, with the much more open, U.S.-educated Kamel Morjane, is a clear indicator, as is the appointment of Ousama Romdhani, a former U.S. exchange student, to the sensitive post of Communications Minister.

Ben Ali's economic team, including his Prime Minister, remains largely in tact, suggesting the President's appreciation for how it worked to help Tunisia weather the global financial crisis, and the GOT's continued commitment to position Tunisia as a business-friendly trade and manufacturing platform. Significantly, Interior Minister Rafik Belhaj Kacem, who oversees the GOT's vast mechanisms to maintain order and repress or vanquish political opposition, remains in

place, and we do not believe the shuffle will in itself yield any improvements in Tunisia's human rights record. The movement of the outgoing Justice Minister, a hardliner and enforcer, to the position of Minister of Higher Education does not appear to bode well for academic freedom in Tunisia. (A cable with biographic details of new cabinet members follows septel.) End summary.

3. (S/NF) Positive changes in the cabinet come in the context of other recent indications that senior policy levels of the GOT are interested in improving bilateral ties.

Intelligence cooperation appears to be back on track. Four U.S. Fulbright candidates received in December long-awaited approval for their courses of study. The coming months will see a series of bilateral military engagements. The U.S. and Tunisia are now very close to signing a bilateral agreement to provide a solid legal foundation for the American Cooperative School of Tunis after a period of uncertainty.

Recommendations

4. (C) Embassy Tunis recommends several steps in light of the cabinet shuffle:

-- The Department should prepare as soon as possible a message of congratulations from the Secretary to new Foreign Minister Morjane. (Note: Depending on developments in the coming days, this letter may also be an appropriate place for the USG to express condolences on the apparent death of (Tunisian diplomat and UN official) SRSG Hedi Annabi, in the Port au Prince earthquake (ref B). End note.)

-- The Embassy also believes that, with the new government in tact, Assistant Secretary Feltman should start looking at his calendar for a convenient time to visit Tunis to consult with a re-vamped GOT.

-- If the Secretary is amenable and her schedule permits, Assistant Secretary Feltman should convey to the new Foreign Minister her interest in meeting with him in Washington.

-- The Embassy also recommends that the Department of Defense study the possibility of making the April Joint Military Commission meeting in Washington a counterpart visit for new Defense Minister Gira.

-- The Embassy also recommends that Secretary Gates send a congratulatory letter to his new Tunisian counterpart.

-- Embassy Tunis also believes that, just as the Ben Ali government is making what appears to be a significant positive gesture toward the USG, (and just as we are very close to inking a hard-fought school agreement), this is not the ideal moment for senior USG officials to publicly chastise the GOT on its (admittedly dismal) record on freedom of expression.

Sharp Contrast Between Outgoing, Incoming Foreign Ministers

5. (C) Many political observers in Tunis were taken by surprise by the announcement, released late on January 14, that President Ben Ali would replace Foreign Minister Abdallah, a dour Francophone, with Defense Minister Kamel Morjane, in the context of a broader cabinet shuffle (ref A).

Abdallah's tenure at the Foreign Ministry, since 2005, was marked by a sharp tightening of restrictions on the movements and activities of U.S. (and other western) diplomats in Tunisia.

Under Foreign Minister Abdallah, even Embassy visits to obscure community development NGOs required government approval through an exchange of diplomatic notes (with requests ignored more often than approved), and Embassy interactions with MFA counterparts likewise were subject to a tedious and lengthy approval process.

6. (C) While many of the rumors flying around Tunis in the months leading up to this long-anticipated shuffle were contradictory, most predicted that Foreign Minister Abdallah would remain in favor, and might be designated Tunisia's next Prime Minister or even named to a newly created post of Vice President. (Comment: We predict that, when the dust settles, Abdallah, known to be close to the First Lady and her Trabelsi clan, will land on his feet, perhaps with a new posting as advisor in the Presidential Palace in Carthage, or somewhere else "inside the circle." End comment.)

7. (C) Kamel Morjane, the new Foreign Minister, has long been seen as the most pro-American senior official in Ben Ali's government. Morjane, U.S. educated, had worked well with U.S. diplomats during more than 15 years in the UN, including postings with UNHCR in Geneva, Djibouti, and Egypt, and as SRSG in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As Defense Minister since 2005, Morjane has been the cabinet member most accessible, and apparently friendly, to the U.S. Embassy, even as the quality of bilateral defense cooperation has remained erratic and generally below potential. Given the GOT's inherent caution and conservatism, it remains to be seen how much room for maneuver Morjane will have as Foreign Minister to loosen restrictions and tangibly strengthen cooperation with the U.S.

New Communications Minister - A Censor Who Likes the U.S.

8. (C) New Communications Minister Oussama Romdhani has held the post (in an acting capacity) since October. The Communications Ministry, which regulates and oversees public media, is viewed as a highly sensitive and strategic organization in a government obsessed with controlling both its image and its citizens' access to information. A fluent English speaker who studied at Georgetown (and earlier spent a year as an exchange student in Erie, PA), Romdhani previously led the Tunisian External Communications Agency, seen by many independent journalists as a censorship mechanism, which it does principally by distributing state advertising to papers and magazines according to their perceived level of loyalty to the government.

9. (C) Romdhani's tenure as Communications Minister, which began in fact if not officially in October, has coincided with an unprecedented level of intimidation and repression against independent journalists (although this repression has mainly been implemented by the Ministry of Interior rather than Communications). Though decidedly lacking in credentials either as a reformer or a champion of freedom of expression, Romdhani has consistently kept an open door to senior U.S. Embassy officials, and periodically proven helpful in resolving various technical issues. Romdhani has been a connection we have long valued, particularly given his authority and proximity to the Presidential palace.

Economic Team - Continuity Key

10. (C) Ben Ali has kept his economic team largely in tact.

Prime Minister Ghannouchi, the respected, diligent, pragmatic, and apolitical technocrat, has served in his post since 1999 and with his reappointment appears set to surpass longevity records for senior officials since Tunisia's independence in 1956. Tunis oddsmakers had expected

Ghannouchi, reportedly tired after a decade on the job, to move on, but it appears Ben Ali has come to view him as indispensable. Ben Ali also appears to value other members of his economic team - Commerce Minister Ben Mosbah, and Development and International Cooperation Minister Jouni (educated in the U.S.) for the efforts to steer Tunisia clear of the worst effects of the global financial crisis which emerged in late 2008. While Finance Minister Kechich, who probably did more than any other member of the economic team to protect Tunisia from the financial crisis, has been replaced, observers note his tenure was viewed as a success and expect he will be rewarded with a good onward posting of some sort. His successor as Finance Minister, Mohamed Ridha Chalgoum, has been head of the Financial Markets Council, an analogue of the American SEC. Like Kechiche, Chalgoum has a reputation as a competent, apolitical technocrat.

11. (C) Also staying on is the U.S. educated Agriculture Minister Abdesalam ansour. Agriculture makes up roughly 11 percent of Tunisia's GDP. Mansour recently sent the Embassy a draft MOU on bilateral agricultural cooperation. While the GOT draft contained a few non-starters, it could nonetheless offer a structure for mutually beneficial agreement, and the GOT's initiative in proposing the agreement represents an important opportunity to shore up bilateral technical/economic cooperation.

Repression Likely to Continue Apace

12. (C) Among the most significant aspects of the cabinet shuffle is the retention of Interior Minister Rafik Belhaj Kacem, which suggests that Ben Ali is satisfied with the way Kaem managed the (profoundly unfair) October 2009 and the harsh campaign of repression against journalists and opposition activists that preceded and followed the polls (Refs C and D). Tunisia's Interior Ministry constitutes, in many ways, a "superMinistry" which casts a long shadow over numerous aspects of daily life in the country and which wields an apparent veto, or at least a strong influence, on decision making at other key ministries. As the Ben Ali government's top "enforcer," Kace's retention suggests the President has no intention to change course on Tunisia's human rights practices. Indeed the clear trend in recent years, particularly noticeable in the past six months, has been decreasing tolerance for government criticism and dissent and increasing levels of state repression.

13. (C) Another key government enforcer, Justice Minister Bechir Tekkari, who had been distinguished by his use of the judiciary to prosecute and jail government opponents, has been moved to the post of Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. While embassy officers have long found it nearly impossible to access university campuses, academic contacts have complained to us about a steady decline in levels of academic freedom in Tunisia, and recent months have seen a harsh government crackdown on student activists. The appointment of Tekkari probably signals the government's desire to further clamp down on campus and suppress student activists who could feed nascent Islamist or other opposition activities. Tekkari's appointment is also unlikely to improve the perceived decline in academic freedom or improve access to campuses by Embassy officers.

GRAY

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2019
TAGS: PREL, PGOV, KDEM, OREP (CONAWAY, MICHAEL), TS
SUBJECT: TUNISIA: CODEL CONAWAY RAISES INTELLIGENCE
COOPERATION AND MIDDLE EAST PEACE WITH FOREIGN MINISTER

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (S/NF) Representative Michael Conaway (R-TX) and Tunisian Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah discussed intelligence cooperation, the Middle East peace process, and bilateral trade, investment, and assistance during a December 19 meeting. Abdallah indicated his willingness to discuss U.S. concerns over intelligence cooperation and expressed his appreciation for additional military assistance in the FY 2010 budget. He criticized the Israeli position on Middle East peace and highlighted Tunisia's moderate stance. End summary.

Intelligence Cooperation

2. (S/NF) Representative Michael Conaway (R-TX) met with Tunisian Foreign Minister Abdallah and Defense Minister Kemal Morjane (septel) the morning of December 19. Recalling the importance of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship, Rep. Conaway explained to Minister Abdallah that the main purpose of his visit was to discuss bilateral intelligence cooperation. As a member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Rep. Conaway stressed the importance of working together against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Abdallah replied that Tunisia and the United States cooperate well on intelligence, a very important issue for President Ben Ali, and suggested that he was open to discussing any problems in this area. Ambassador Gray indicated to Abdallah that he would like an opportunity to meet with him separately to raise U.S. concerns on intelligence

cooperation. (That meeting took place on December 21 and is being reported in separate channels.)

Middle East Peace

3. (C) Rep. Conaway urged Minister Abdallah to leverage Tunisia's influence with the Israeli and Palestinian sides to advocate a peaceful solution to the long-running conflict.

Abdallah replied that progress on Middle East peace was held back by the "intransigent" attitude of the Israeli government. He indicated that in his recent meeting with a delegation from the American Jewish Committee, he had underlined the need for the Israeli side to make a gesture to advance progress toward talks. Abdallah opined that the recent European Union declaration was a positive step, but that it was still necessary to push the Israeli government to stop settlement activity and to begin negotiations. Abdallah praised the role of Special Envoy Mitchell but said that Tunisia could not agree to his request to normalize relations with Israel in the current context, as doing so would go against public opinion in the Arab world and in Tunisia itself. Abdallah stressed, however, his confidence in President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and in the vision of the President's Cairo speech, and pledged to use Tunisia's "privileged" relationship with the Palestinians to support the peace process.

Bilateral Relations

4. (C) Rep. Conaway said he hoped to see an increase in trade and tourism, and promised to promote awareness of Tunisia in the Congress. Abdallah noted the potential for an Open Skies agreement and other means to promote bilateral trade and tourism. He thanked Rep. Conaway for the increased military assistance figures in the FY 2010 budget, noting the positive spirit of cooperation implied by the new figure. Signaling an expected drop in FMF levels in 2011, Rep. Conaway replied that with a growing public debt, the United States may not be able to continue to maintain these levels in all areas in future years.

5. (U) Representative Conaway did not have the opportunity to clear this message before leaving Tunis.

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Content

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 TUNIS 000492

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DEPT FOR NEA AA/S FELTMAN, DAS HUDSON, AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE
GRAY, AND NEA/MAG FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/13/2029

TAGS: PREL, PGOV, ECON, KPAO, MASS, PHUM, TS

SUBJECT: TROUBLED TUNISIA: WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for E.O. 12958 reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (S/NF) By many measures, Tunisia should be a close US ally. But it is not. While we share some key values and the country has a strong record on development, Tunisia has big problems. President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor. Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom and angered by First Family corruption, high unemployment and regional inequities. Extremism poses a continuing threat.

Compounding the problems, the GOT brooks no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Instead, it seeks to impose ever greater control, often using the police.

The result: Tunisia is troubled and our relations are too.

2. (S/NF) In the past three years, US Mission Tunis has responded by offering greater cooperation where the Tunisians say they want it, but not shied from making plain the need for change. We have had some successes, notably in the commercial and military assistance areas. But we have also had failures. We have been blocked, in part, by a Foreign Ministry that seeks to control all our contacts in the government and many other organizations. Too often, the GOT prefers the illusion of engagement to the hard work of real cooperation. Major change in Tunisia will have to wait for Ben Ali's departure, but President Obama and his policies create opportunities now. What should we do to take advantage of them? We recommend:

-- keep a strong focus on democratic reform and respect for human rights, but shift the way we promote these goals;

- seek to engage the GOT in a dialogue on issues of mutual interest, including trade and investment, Middle East peace, and greater Maghreb integration;
- offer Tunisians (with an emphasis on youth) more English-language training, educational exchanges, and cultural programs;
- move our military assistance away from FMF, but look for new ways to build security and intelligence cooperation; and,
- increase high-level contacts but stress that deeper US cooperation depends on real Tunisian engagement. End Summary.

 The Backdrop: Historic Relations and Shared Values

3. (SBU) The United States and Tunisia have 200 years of close ties and common interests, including advancing regional peace, combating terrorism, and building prosperity. Since independence, Tunisia deserves credit for its economic and social progress. Without the natural resources of its neighbors, Tunisia focused on people and diversified its economy. In a success all too rare, the GOT is effective in delivering services (education, health care, infrastructure and security) to its people. The GOT has sought to build a &knowledge economy⁸ to attract FDI that will create high value-added jobs. As a result, the country has enjoyed five percent real GDP growth for the past decade. On women's rights, Tunisia is a model. And, Tunisia has a long history of religious tolerance, as demonstrated by its treatment of its Jewish community. While significant challenges remain (above all the country's 14 percent unemployment rate) on balance Tunisia has done better than most in the region.

4. (SBU) On foreign policy, Tunisia has long played a moderate role (although recently its goal has been to &get along with everyone⁸). The GOT rejects the Arab League boycott of Israeli goods. Although it broke ties with Israel in 2000, the GOT has from time to time taken part in quiet discussions with Israeli officials. The GOT also supports Mahmoud Abbas' leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

Tunisia participated in the Annapolis conference and has supported our efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The GOT is like-minded on Iran, is an ally in the fight against terrorism, and has maintained an Embassy in Iraq at the Charge level. Moreover, Tunisia recently signed a debt forgiveness agreement with the GOI on Paris Club terms; it is the first Arab country to do so.

5. (SBU) Finally, although Tunisians have been deeply angry over the war in Iraq and perceived US bias towards Israel, most still admire the &the American dream.⁸ Despite the anger at US foreign policy, we see a growing desire for English-language instruction, a wish for more educational and scientific exchanges, and a belief in the American culture of innovation. Tunisians see these as important for their future.

 The Problem: A Sclerotic Regime and Growing Corruption

6. (C) Despite Tunisia's economic and social progress, its record on political freedoms is poor. Tunisia is a police state, with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems. The GOT can point to some political progress in the last decade, including an end to prior review of books and ICRC access to many prisons. But for every step forward there has been

another back, for example the recent takeover of important private media outlets by individuals close to President Ben Ali.

7. (C) The problem is clear: Tunisia has been ruled by the same president for 22 years. He has no successor. And, while President Ben Ali deserves credit for continuing many of the progressive policies of President Bourguiba, he and his regime have lost touch with the Tunisian people. They tolerate no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Increasingly, they rely on the police for control and focus on preserving power. And, corruption in the inner circle is growing. Even average Tunisians are now keenly aware of it, and the chorus of complaints is rising.

Tunisians intensely dislike, even hate, First Lady Leila Trabelsi and her family. In private, regime opponents mock her; even those close to the government express dismay at her reported behavior. Meanwhile, anger is growing at Tunisia's high unemployment and regional inequities. As a consequence, the risks to the regime's long-term stability are increasing.

US-Tunisian Relations: If Only We Would Say This Is Paradise

8. (S/NF) US-Tunisian relations reflect the realities of the Ben Ali regime. On the positive side, we have accomplished several goals in recent years, including:

- increasing substantially US assistance to the military to combat terrorism;
- improving (albeit still with challenges) some important counterterrorism programs;
- strengthening commercial ties, including holding a TIFA Council meeting, hosting several trade and economic delegations and growing business activity;
- building ties to young people and the cultural community through expanded English-language programs, a new film festival, and new media outreach efforts; and
- encouraging congressional interest in Tunisia.

9. (C) But we have also had too many failures. The GOT frequently declines to engage, and there have been too many lost opportunities. The GOT has:

- declined to engage on the Millennium Challenge Account;
- declined USAID regional programs to assist young people;
- reduced the number of Fulbright scholarship students; and,
- declined to engage in Open Skies negotiations.

Most troubling has been the GOT's unilateral and clumsy effort to impose new and retroactive taxes on the American Cooperative School of Tunis. There is little doubt that this action was at the behest of powerful friends (probably including Leila Trabelsi) of the International School of Carthage. It raises important questions about Tunisian governance and our friendship. If, in the end, the GOT's actions force the school to close we will need to downsize the Mission, limit our programs, and dial down our relations.

10. (C) At the same time, the GOT has also increasingly tightened controls that make it exceptionally difficult for the US Mission to conduct business. The controls, put in place by Foreign Minister Abdallah, require the Mission to obtain written MFA permission for contact with all official and semi-official Tunisian organizations. Mid-level GOT officials are no longer allowed to communicate with embassy personnel without express authorization and MFA-cleared instructions. All meeting requests and demarches must be conveyed by diplomatic note. Most go unanswered. All Embassies in Tunis are affected by these controls, but they are no less frustrating for that.

11. (C) Beyond the stifling bureaucratic controls, the GOT makes it difficult for the Mission to maintain contact with a wide swath of Tunisian society. GOT-controlled newspapers often attack Tunisian civil society activists who participate in Embassy activities, portraying them as traitors.

Plain-clothes police sometimes lurk outside events hosted by EmbOffs, intimidating participants. In one example of the GOT's tactics, we awarded a local grant through MEPI to a Tunisian woman, but her boss at the Commerce Ministry told her not to pursue it. She persisted for a time, but backed out when she began receiving anonymous death threats.

12. (C) Some of the GOT's actions may be related to its intense dislike of the former Administration's &freedom agenda.⁸ The GOT considered this policy dangerous and believed it opened the door for Islamic extremists to seize power. GOT leaders have made no secret of their disapproval of the Ambassador's and other EmbOffs' contacts with opposition party leaders -- in particular the Progressive Democratic Party's Nejb Chebbi, the object of President Ben Ali's intense personal animus -- as well as civil society activists who criticize the regime. They were intensely critical, as well, of the previous Administration's use of public statements (such as on World Press Freedom Day 2008), which they believed unfairly targeted Tunisia.

So, What Should We Do?

13. (C) Notwithstanding the frustrations of doing business here, we cannot write off Tunisia. We have too much at stake. We have an interest in preventing al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other extremist groups from establishing a foothold here. We have an interest in keeping the Tunisian military professional and neutral. We also have an interest in fostering greater political openness and respect for human rights. It is in our interest, too, to build prosperity and Tunisia's middle class, the underpinning for the country's long-term stability. Moreover, we need to increase mutual understanding to help repair the image of the United States and secure greater cooperation on our many regional challenges. The United States needs help in this region to promote our values and policies. Tunisia is one place where, in time, we might find it.

The Extended Hand

14. (C) Since President Obama's inauguration, Tunisians have been more receptive to the United States. Senior GOT officials have warmly welcomed President Obama's statements and speeches. His address in Cairo drew particular praise, with the Foreign Minister calling it & courageous.⁸ Meanwhile, some civil society contacts who had been boycotting Embassy functions in opposition to the war in Iraq have started coming around again. Generally, the metaphor of the & extended hand⁸ in President Obama's inaugural address has resonated powerfully with Tunisians. Concretely, the Tunisians have welcomed many of the Obama Administration's actions, including the decision to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center and the plans for troop withdrawals from Iraq. Above all, Tunisians have been pleased by the President's tone, statements and actions (so far) on Middle East peace.

How To Advance Democracy and Human Rights

15. (S) The Obama Administration creates an important opportunity, then, to explore whether and how to pursue a more productive bilateral relationship. GOT officials say the United States tends to focus on issues where we do not see eye-to-eye. They bristle at our calls for greater democratic reform and respect for human rights, and protest they are making progress. For years, the Embassy's top goal has been to promote progress in these areas. We need to keep the focus, especially with 2009 an election year in Tunisia.

Ben Ali is certain to be reelected by a wide margin in a process that will be neither free nor fair. In this context, we should continue to underscore the importance of these issues, and to maintain contacts with the few opposition parties and civil society groups critical of the regime.

16. (C) We should consider how this policy objective is publicly manifested, however. For several years, the United States has been out in front -- publicly and privately -criticizing the GOT for the absence of democracy and the lack of respect for human rights. There is a place for such criticism, and we do not advocate abandoning it. We do recommend a more pragmatic approach, however, whereby we would speak to the Tunisians very clearly and at a very high level about our concerns regarding Tunisia's democracy and human rights practices, but dial back the public criticism.

The key element is more and frequent high-level private candor. We recommend being explicit with GOT leaders that we are changing our approach, while also making clear that we will continue to engage privately with opposition parties and civil society.

17. (C) In addition, we should increase our efforts to persuade our European partners, and other like-minded countries, to step up their efforts to persuade the GOT to accelerate political reform. While some in the EU (e.g., Germany, the UK) agree with us, key countries such as France and Italy have shied from putting pressure on the GOT. We should work to get them to do so, and to condition further assistance and advanced EU associate status on it.

Advancing Other US Interests

18. (C) Whether we succeed on democracy and human rights, the United States has an interest in building relations with a wide spectrum of Tunisians, particularly the young. To do so, and to build good will with the GOT, we should offer the government a dialogue on a range of issues of mutual interest, backed up by increased assistance. Of greatest interest to the GOT would be increased engagement on economic issues, i.e., on increasing bilateral trade and investment, as well as the provision of technical assistance, especially involving technology transfer. The Tunisians would welcome a revival of the US-North African Economic Partnership, as well as other efforts that would promote North African economic integration.

19. (C) In addition, we should offer serious engagement in high-priority areas for Tunisians that will also benefit the United States, including:

- more, and more comprehensive, English-language programs;
- Ph.D. scholarships for Tunisian students to study in the United States, such as those that USAID used to make available in the 1970's and 1980's;

- more support for University linkages;
- more science and technology exchanges -- to give substance to a bilateral S&T agreement that, with no money behind it, has had little impact; and
- more cultural programming.

20. (C) In addition to talking to the GOT, we need to engage directly with the Tunisian people, especially youth. The Embassy is already using Facebook as a communication tool.

In addition, we have the Ambassador's blog, a relatively new undertaking that is attracting attention. Over the past couple of years, the Embassy has substantially increased its outreach to Tunisian youth through concerts, film festivals, and other events. Our information resource center and America's Corners are popular ways for Tunisians to access unfiltered news and information. We should continue and increase such programs.

 Advancing Broader Foreign Policy Objectives And Security Cooperation

21. (C) We should also seek new ways to engage Tunisia in pursuit of our broader foreign policy agenda. We believe that the GOT would welcome this kind of engagement, and that it would pay dividends, not only in our bilateral relationship but also on transnational issues. For example, we continue to count on GOT support for our efforts to promote Israel-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab peace. Although Tunisia has limited influence within the Arab League, it remains in the moderate camp, as demonstrated most recently by its refusal to participate in the extraordinary Doha Summit on the situation in Gaza. At appropriate moments, we would recommend doing more to brief the GOT on our efforts in the peace process and to draw them into providing additional support. Special Envoy Mitchell's stop here in April was well received and we should look for ways to continue such consultations.

22. (S/NF) There are opportunities in the area of security cooperation, too. For starters, we know that Tunisia could be doing a better job in sharing intelligence with us about the threat of terrorism in North Africa. This was all too clear when, yet again, the GOT failed recently to share information with us in a timely fashion on a reported plot against US military personnel. GRPO has been taking steps to increase cooperation through liaison channels; while there has been progress, more is possible.

23. (C) On military cooperation, the time has come to shift our military assistance away from FMF to more targeted programs that meet specific needs. There is increasing evidence the Tunisian military does not need FMF to the degree it claims, and in any event it has bought us too little in the way of cooperation. Rather, we should focus on working with the Tunisians to identify a small number of areas where cooperation makes sense. The recent use of the Section 1206 and PKO programs to provide the Tunisian military with ground surveillance radar and unmanned surveillance aircraft is a good example.

 Our Message: Deeper Cooperation Depends On Real Engagement

24. (S) Tunisia is not an ally today, but we still share important history and values. It is fair to consider Tunisia a friend, albeit cautious, closed and distant. Most importantly, in a region in

turmoil, Tunisia has better prospects than most even though it is troubled. In the end, serious change here will have to await Ben Ali's departure.

But President Obama's new tone and policies may create a window of opportunity. We should use it to make overtures to the GOT in areas where they seek our involvement or assistance. And, we should seek to engage all Tunisians (especially the young) in ways that will improve the future for both our countries.

25. (S) To succeed, however, we need resources and commitment from Washington. New and expanded programs will require money and staff to implement them, particularly in public affairs. Senior US Government officials must also be prepared to visit more often than in recent years to engage the Tunisians. Meetings outside Tunisia are a good tool, too. The Secretary's recent meeting with North African Foreign Ministers on the margins of the Gaza Reconstruction Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh provides one model for engagement and offers the added benefit of allowing us to also promote greater Maghreb integration.

26. (S) Finally, we recommend US officials be clear in all meetings with Tunisians: more US cooperation depends on real Tunisian engagement. For too long Tunisia has skated by. A small country, in a tough region, the GOT relies on vague promises of friendship and empty slogans. More can and should be expected of Tunisia. The GOT frequently says it is a US ally and calls for greater US engagement. We should respond clearly: yes, but only if we get genuine help from Tunisia on the challenges that matter to us all. The Tunisian government loves the illusion of engagement. The US government should press for the hard work of real cooperation.

Godec

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S E C R E T TUNIS 000472**

**NOFORN
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**STATE FOR NEA/MAG (MHAYES), DRL (KMCGEENEY), AND S/WIC
(ARICCI)
PASS DOD/OSD (ALIoTTA)
PASS DOJ/ODAG (MSTRANSKY)**

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/15/2019

TAGS: PREL, PHUM, PTER, KDRG, TS

SUBJECT: ICRC SAYS A FORMER GUANTANAMO DETAINEE NEEDS TREATMENT

REF: A. TUNIS 407

B. TUNIS 399

C. 08 TUNIS 1137

D. 08 TUNIS 992

E. 07 TUNIS 1483

F. 07 TUNIS 1448

G. 07 TUNIS 1425

H. 07 TUNIS 1060

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and(d)

1. (S/NF) The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Tunisian Coordinator for Regional Protection Francesco Bruscoli (strictly protect) informed acting P/E Counselor July 14 on the margins of a reception that the ICRC had recently visited the two former Guantanamo detainees imprisoned in Tunisia. He said that Abdallah Ben Omar (al-Hajji) is still suffering psychologically, is not coherent, and needs treatment. He said Ben Omar was suffering from his cumulative experience over the last seven years (Refs C-H). He was not more precise about the treatment Ben Omar needs, and had no comments regarding Lufti Bin Swei Lagha.

2. (S/NF) Bruscoli asked about the status of the remaining 10 Tunisian Guantanamo detainees. Pol/Econ Chief mentioned that there had been news articles about USG discussions with Germany, Italy and others about possibly accepting Tunisian detainees. In that context, Bruscoli said the German Embassy was seeking assurances from the GOT regarding treatment of returnees but was not satisfied with the response so far.

3. (C) Regarding other ICRC work, he said they would soon begin a new project aimed at reducing the number of Tunisians going into the prison system. He said the necessary laws are already on the books but need to be implemented. They have GOT support for this project which will begin on a trial basis in one of the smaller provinces. The project will work to reduce the number of people in prison through both pre-sentencing measures including limiting pre-trial detention and sentencing measures that might provide more alternatives to prison sentences.

4. (S/NF) Comment: It is highly unusual for ICRC officials to be so frank regarding the former Guantanamo detainees and presumably indicates serious ICRC concern about Ben Omar's condition. We will seek a follow-up meeting with Francesco Bruscoli.

Godec

09TUNIS454 Date09/07/2009 04:30 OriginEmbassy Tunis ClassificationSECRET//NOFORN Header

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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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S E C R E T TUNIS 000454**

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**STATE FOR EEB/IFD/OMA, EEB/EPPD, AND NEA/MAG (HAYES)
STATE PASS USTR (BURKHEAD) AND USAID (MC CLOUD)
USDOC FOR ITA/MAC/ONE (MASON), ADVOCACY CTR (TABINE), AND
CLDP (TEJTEL AND MCMANUS)
USDOC PASS USPTO (ADAMS, BROWN AND MARSHALL)
CASABLANCA FOR FCS (ORTIZ)
CAIRO FOR FINANCIAL ATTACHE (SEVERENS)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER**

**E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2019
TAGS: ECON, EFIN, EINV, ETRD, TS
SUBJECT: POLITICS RATTLE THE TUNISIAN-AMERICAN CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE**

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C/NF) What was to be a routine Elective General Assembly for the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce turned out to be less so when TACC's President, Mondher Ben Ayed, announced he was not running for re-election. Popular among the membership and credited for repairing TACC's broken finances, Ben Ayed cited "health" reasons as the impetus for his departure. A week later, the TACC board, now made up of eleven Tunisian and nine American companies, elected the relatively unknown Nazeh Ben Ammar, head of a Tunisian textile company, as the new president. Ben Ayed met privately with the Ambassador and revealed he chose to step down because of the political risks involved in the position.

He said the GOT viewed TACC as a "political organization" because of its role as a Tunisian interface with the U.S.

Embassy. Unfortunately, at least one U.S. company is thinking twice about participating in TACC, citing nervousness about how the GOT views the organization. TACC's future plans seem to be business as usual - work on the various committees, strengthening bilateral business relations, and a door-knock lobbying mission to the United States in October. It remains to be seen if new leadership will translate into any change for the role of TACC in Tunisia. End Summary.

TACC's New Board

2. (U) On June 18, the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce (TACC) held their Elective General Assembly, electing the new 20-member board of the organization. Eleven Tunisian and nine American companies presented themselves as candidates and were unanimously voted in by acclamation from the membership. Among the U.S. companies are Coca-Cola, Citibank, Cisco, and Pfizer (please see complete list of board members in Para 9). TACC is not yet an official American Chamber of Commerce, in part because they do not have a U.S. company president nor do American companies make up half of the board. In 2007, TACC was able to recruit a sizeable number of U.S. companies to the board who had not participated in TACC previously.

Presidential Politics: Surprise Resignations and Candidates

3. (C/NF) The Elective General Assembly went largely as expected except for the surprise announcement that Mondher Ben Ayed, TACC President, would not run for re-election. He cited "health reasons." From its birth in 1989 until 2007, TACC had only one president, Moncef Barouni. The organization had weathered periods of financial mismanagement and dwindling membership until Ben Ayed was elected. Ben Ayed was instrumental in leading TACC out of their financial woes and into the black again, to the point where TACC is today turning over a considerable profit. Under Ben Ayed's leadership, TACC also expanded U.S. company membership, created an English-language training program, and strengthened ties with the Embassy.

4. (C/NF) As soon as Ben Ayed made his announcement, speculation ran rampant as to why he stepped down and who would step into his place. Rym Bedoui (protect), owner of Agora Foods, a food processing plant, privately told the Embassy she was interested in running for the position. She told the Embassy that she had begun lobbying board members for support when Ben Ayed summoned her into his office and urged her to stay on as Secretary General. Bedoui also sought out a meeting with Slim Zarrouk, a well-connected businessman with ties to the GOT, who told her "they" viewed her as too pro-U.S. and that "they" weren't comfortable with her as TACC President for "security reasons." Bedoui took Zarrouk's comments to mean the GOT didn't want someone seen as pro-U.S. leading TACC in the run-up to the October 2009 elections. Bedoui also added that Ben Ayed has strong business ties with Zarrouk.

5. (C/NF) On June 25, the new TACC board members convened to vote on their new leadership. Nazeh Ben Ammar, owner of a textile company and prior member-at-large on the TACC board, ran for the Presidency unopposed. In a private meeting with the Ambassador, Ben Ayed shared that Ben Ammar had been a safe choice, and the most likely to push TACC forward on its commercial projects. Sami Smaoui, head of Hewlett-Packard in Tunisia, noted the choice of Ben Ammar was odd, in that most TACC presidents had served on the executive board before in some capacity. Ben Ammar paid a courtesy call on the Embassy on July 1 and offered his assurance that cooperation would remain fruitful.

Nervousness About Embassy Involvement

6. (S/NF) In his meeting with the Ambassador, Ben Ayed said he stepped down from TACC as a personal choice. Despite the Embassy's purely economic and commercial involvement with the organization, he said the GOT viewed TACC not as a regular chamber of commerce, but as an interface between Tunisia and the U.S. Embassy. Ben Ayed said he defended the Ambassador and the Embassy in face of criticism from "some" in the GOT, but that it was getting "dangerous" for him and the job carried risks.

7. (C) Since its inception, the Embassy has had an honorary, non-voting seat on the TACC Board. Although the Embassy had been invited in years prior to count votes in the Executive Board meeting (to elect leadership), this year the Embassy was only invited to the June 18 Elective General Assembly.

Smaoui voiced his concern over this at the Executive Board meeting and asked why the Embassy was not invited. Ben Ayed replied that this was TACC internal business and there was no need for the Embassy to be there. TACC did, however, invite the Embassy to their July 6 board meeting and acted as if it was business as usual. In a separate meeting with Econ/Commercial Officer, Sami Smaoui said he was nervous he didn't know exactly how the GOT viewed TACC, and said that he was increasingly disillusioned that TACC was turning into a "Tunisian business organization." If things continued on the current path, he said, he would not run for a spot on the board again.

Upcoming TACC Activities

8. (U) In the July 6 board meeting, Ben Ammar discussed staffing TACC's committees: the Tunisian Company Committee, whose purpose is to promote exports to the U.S.; the US Company Committee, facilitating links with U.S. companies;

the Fundraising and Activities Committee; the MENA Council Committee, promoting ties with chambers in other Middle East and North African Countries; and the Legal Committee. TACC is planning a door-knock mission to the United States in October, where it will lobby members of congress and key USG agencies to raise awareness about Tunisia and improve contacts. TACC has asked for Embassy assistance, as in the past, to organize this trip.

TACC 2009-2010 Board

9. (U) AMERICAN COMPANIES

- Starz Electronics
- Citibank
- Cisco
- Crown Maghreb Can
- Pfizer
- BST/Coca-Cola
- BMS/UPSA

- Hewlett-Packard Maghreb
- Devonshire Investors

TUNISIAN COMPANIES

- Tunisie Courtage
- Finest Food
- Mami

- AB Consulting
- Maille Fil
- Mazars
- Dahmani Transit International
- Hotel Imperial Marhaba
- Taams
- Hexabyte
- Kallel and Associates

Comment

10. (C) Mondher Ben Ayed's resignation is unfortunate but not wholly surprising given the intense political nature of Tunisia in the run-up to the October 2009 elections. Given that the Embassy's engagement with TACC has been solely economic and commercial, the fact that the GOT views TACC as "political" provides insight into the regime and its thinking. Ben Ayed has kept TACC firmly focused on commercial matters, and has done an excellent job rebuilding the organization. Unfortunately, all organizations in today's Tunisia are seen through a political lens. There are two key questions after these latest developments. First, whether they will affect TACC's ability to operate effectively. And, second, whether American companies will conclude they are better off disassociating themselves from TACC to avoid an unnecessary political risk. We will have the answers in due course. In the meantime, however, we believe the TACC election, which should have been simple and straightforward, does not bode well for the organization or for Tunisia. End Comment.

Godec

**09TUNIS415 Date23/06/2009 03:49 OriginEmbassy Tunis ClassificationSECRET//NOFORN
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RUEAWJA/DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE**

RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN IMMEDIATE 0186
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID IMMEDIATE 0546
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME IMMEDIATE 0804

Content

S E C R E T TUNIS 000415

**NOFORN
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**STATE:NEA/MAG (SWILLIAMS, MNARDI, MHAYES)
ALSO FOR DRL:KMCGEENEY, S/WIC:ARICCI
PASS DOD/OSD:ALIOTTA, DOJ/ODAG:MSTRANSKY**

**E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/23/2019
TAGS: PHUM, PREL, KDRG, PTER, TS
SUBJECT: GOT ASKS EUROPEANS NOT TO TAKE TUNISIAN GUANTANAMO
DETAINEES**

**REF: A. TUNIS 407
B. TUNIS 339
C. TUNIS 32
D. 08 TUNIS 1137 AND PREVIOUS**

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (S/NF) A senior MFA official convoked the German, Italian and Spanish Chiefs of Mission June 19 to inform them the GOT wants the Tunisian detainees in Guantanamo Camp returned home. According to the European COMs, the implicit message was that their governments should not accept the US request to take Tunisian detainees. The COMs have informed their capitals, but have no response yet. In a meeting June 22, a small group of Ambassadors (including the German and Italian COMs) discussed the MFA demarches. Among the Ambassadors, views differed on the risks to Tunisian prisoners, but some said there is a possibility of torture or mistreatment for anyone accused of terrorism. End Summary.

EUROPEANS DEMARCHED

2. (S) Following FM Abdallah's meeting on Guantanamo detainees with Ambassador Godec on June 18 (Ref A), the MFA convoked German Ambassador Horst-Wolfram Kerll, Italian Ambassador Antonio D'Andria and Spanish Charge Santiago Miralles Huete to separate meetings on June 19.

3. (S) In the meetings, MFA Secretary of State for Maghreb, Arab and African Affairs Abdelhafidh Hergeum delivered a demarche similar to that given to Ambassador Godec, specifically:

- Tunisia wants its citizens in Guantanamo returned,
- Tunisia does not torture and has signed the Convention Against Torture,

-- Tunisia's image would suffer if the detainees were sent to other countries.

The implicit message from Hergeum, according to the European COMs, was that their countries should not agree to the US request to accept Tunisian detainees. The three officials have informed their capitals but have no response. According to the German Ambassador, the Tunisian Ambassador in Berlin has delivered the same demarche to the German MFA.

AMBASSADORS' MEETING

4. (S) On June 22, Ambassador discussed the GOT demarche with Ambassador Kerll, Ambassador D'Andria, UK Ambassador Chris O'Connor, French Ambassador Serge Degallaix, and Canadian Ambassador Bruno Picard. Ambassador Godec reviewed the Foreign Minister's demarche with the German and Italian Ambassadors then detailing the demarches they had received.

5. (S/NF) The Canadian Ambassador noted the GOT has offered, as evidence that it does not torture, the case of Imam Said Jaziri who was repatriated from Canada to Tunisia despite allegations that he would be mistreated. The Canadian Ambassador said the comparison between Jaziri and the Guantanamo detainees is "crap", explaining that Jaziri was a petty criminal and not accused of terrorism. The Canadian government reviewed Jaziri's case carefully and decided he could be transferred since he did have links with terrorism.

The Canadian decision, Picard suggested, might well have been otherwise if Jaziri had been accused of terrorism.

6. (S/NF) The Italian Ambassador said Italy had had few problems with individuals they had transferred to Tunisia.

The Italians have been in contact with their families and lawyers and have not heard any serious complaints. Why, he asked, would the GOT want to mistreat or torture transferred Guantanamo detainees?

7. (S/NF) Ambassador Godec noted that there are credible

reports of one of the first two transferees being mistreated, including information from the lawyer, the family and statements in open court. Moreover, there are credible reports of Ministry of Interior officials mistreating detainees and prisoners in other cases. He added that contrary to GOT claims, the ICRC cannot visit all Tunisian prisons as it does not have access to non-notified MOI facilities. The UK Ambassador opined that the GOT uses torture as a form of punishment.

8. (S/NF) The Canadian Ambassador said the GOT's statements that it does not torture are "bullshit." The Canadian Ambassador (protect) said he had direct, first hand evidence of torture/mistreatment of a prisoner that lasted several months. The Canadian and German Ambassadors agreed that anyone in Tunisian prisons on terrorism charges is at risk of mistreatment or torture.

9. (S/NF) The Ambassadors concluded the discussion with several noting that Tunisian diplomatic assurances regarding appropriate treatment of prisoners is of value, but that a follow-up mechanism is required to ensure commitments are kept.

COMMENT

10. (S/NF) The GOT clearly and strongly wants the Tunisian detainees in Guantanamo returned home. As we suggested in Ref A, Washington agencies may wish to consider whether to offer to return the Tunisian detainees if the GOT agrees to permit US access to the first two transferees and ongoing access to any future transferees. Such an understanding would need to include a mechanism to address the problems that may arise. While there is no absolute guarantee against mistreatment, such an understanding would provide transferees additional protection. Whether the GOT would accept such an arrangement is another matter. We are not optimistic, but it is worth considering. If Washington decides to continue with efforts to transfer the Tunisian detainees to third countries, we need to officially inform the GOT at a high-level and soon.

Godec

**09TUNIS399 Date18/06/2009 05:58 OriginEmbassy Tunis ClassificationSECRET//NOFORN
Header**

**P 181758Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6455
INFO MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY
SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T TUNIS 000399**

NOFORN

**STATE FOR NEA/MAG (SWILLIAMS, MHAYES, JPATTERSON)
DRL: KMCGEENEY, S/WCI: ARICCI
DOD/OSD:ALIOTTA, DOJ/ODAG:MSTRANSKY**

**E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2028
TAGS: PHUM, PREL, PTER, KDRG, TS
SUBJECT: ICRC: TREATMENT OF PRISONERS IN MOI FACILITIES A
CONCERN**

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S/NF) The International Red Cross Committee Regional (ICRC) Delegate Yves Arnoldy told the Ambassador ICRC priorities in Tunisia are overcrowding in general and treatment of prisoners in

MOI facilities. The ICRC has a good working relationship with the Ministry of Justice, but the Ministry of Interior will take more time. He confirmed that the ICRC has access to some notified MOI facilities and was trying to get information about non-notified facilities. He also said, if offered the chance to make a recommendation about the transfer of Tunisian detainees held in Guantanamo back to Tunisia that he, "would not like to be in the Ambassador's place." End Summary.

Guantanamo Detainees

2. (S) The Ambassador met recently with ICRC Delegate Yves Arnoldy to obtain an update on the organization's activities in Tunisia and the region.

3. (S/NF) Discussing the Guantanamo detention facility, the Ambassador stressed President Obama's intention to close the facility by the end of the year. He said the question of transferring the Tunisian detainees back to Tunisia was under review in Washington and asked what Arnoldy would recommend if he had the opportunity. Arnoldy responded, obliquely saying, it was a difficult decision and he "would not like to be in the Ambassador's place." He asked to be kept informed about the status of any potential transferees because ICRC is in touch with their families in Tunisia and will keep them informed. ICRC will also be testing a video conferencing capability soon to improve communications between detainees still in Guantanamo and their families.

ICRC Activities

4. (S/NF) Arnoldy said the ICRC is focused on the long-term in Tunisia. It was only allowed access to prisoners in 2005.

It is a question of building trust, which takes time, but relations have reached an, "interesting level with solid ground for development particularly with the Ministry of Justice." The ICRC has two tracks it is working on, overcrowding in general, and treatment of prisoners in facilities under MOI control.

Relations with MOJ

5. (S/NF) Arnoldy said the ICRC relations with the Ministry of Justice are cooperative. He had direct contact whenever he needed it with his interlocutors up to the Minister, and there were clear signs of political will to cooperate on prison inspections. The MOJ is ready to take advantage of the resources ICRC has to offer and is becoming interested in a dialogue on wider issues of justice. He could see possibilities to develop activities with the MOJ beyond just treatment of prisoners to a more strategic, structural level, including training of staff and exchange of ideas with other national systems. When asked by the Ambassador if he could confirm if the MOI had access to prisoners held in MOJ facilities he said he could not add any information to this, but then added, that certain ministries have the ability to affect the MOJ system.

Relations with MOI

6. (S/NF) Arnoldy characterized ICRC relations with the MOI as "needing improvement." The ICRC is taking a step-by-step approach and the level of dialogue has made some progress since the beginning. However, changing treatment is a long-term issue that will entail changes in the MOJ's attitude and "mentality." The ICRC is seeking to improve the dialogue and develop the basis for adding more substance.

Arnoldy confirmed that the ICRC has access to "notified" MOI facilities and was trying to get information about "non-notified" facilities.

Relations with the MFA

7. (C) Arnoldy said he has to double track his meeting requests with the Ministry of Justice via diplomatic note to the MFA however the MFA does not block or delay his requests.

He noted that his relationship with the MFA had declined somewhat after the departure of Hatem Ben Salim who was the Secretary of State for European Affairs until 2008.

NGO Reports of Treatment

8. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked Arnoldy for his impression of the reliability of information on treatment of prisoners provided by NGOs and others without direct access to the prisoners. He asked if the ICRC questioned their public statements about treatment. Arnoldy said, it is difficult for NGOs and others to know exactly what is happening and third hand sourcing has its problems. Not everything they say is accurate, but it is a source of information. They often give him tips that he can follow-up on or verify and sometimes they do have good sources, especially through contact with prisoners' families.

Regional Activities

9. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked for an overview of the ICRC office's regional activities, which Arnoldy is responsible for, in brief:

-- Libya - Relations are difficult. Arnoldy has a hard time visiting Libya because of his Swiss passport and the strained relations between Libya and Switzerland. ICRC depends on Tunisian staff going to Libya or Libyans coming to Tunisia.

-- Mauritania - The ICRC has signed a headquarters agreement with Mauritania upgrading their status to a mission but the office will still answer to the Tunis office. There are approximately 1,200 prisoners in Mauritania.

-- Morocco - ICRC has a presence in Morocco but does not have any diplomatic status. Therefore the Morocco office focuses on issues of international humanitarian law. The rest of ICRC activities are handled through the Tunis office.

Morocco is the biggest file in the region, concerned mainly individuals who "disappeared" as a result of the Western Sahara conflict. ICRC is discussing up-grading its status with the government of Morocco, it is just a question of time. When they reach an agreement, ICRC will likely open several offices in Morocco which will not be dependent on the Tunis office.

10. (U) Arnoldy expressed the ICRC's appreciation for USG support for the organization. The ICRC depends on donors to support it so it can react quickly in a crisis and not wait until it has confirmed funding before taking action.

Comment

11. (S/NF) Arnoldy was as frank as he could be given the confidentiality policy of the ICRC. It was clear that he was not positive about the prison conditions in the MOI facilities nor about the MOI's attitude toward cooperating with the ICRC. He did say however, that some progress had been made in the ICRC-MOI dialogue but that it would take time. Given that ICRC is the only international organization with reliable access to the prisons, we have to give weight to their comments, even if cryptic.

Godec

**09TUNIS338 Date03/06/2009 04:35 OriginEmbassy Tunis ClassificationSECRET//NOFORN
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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6339
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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S E C R E T TUNIS 000338**

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**NEA/MAG FOR (MHAYES, JPATTERSON)
AND INR (TKING)**

**E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2019
TAGS: PINR, PGOV, PREL, TS
SUBJECT: BIOGRAPHIC UPDATE ON SAKHR EL-MATRI, GENIAL
INTERLOCUTOR, RAISING HIS PROFILE**

**REF: A. TUNIS 108
B. 08 TUNIS 97689**

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S/NF) Sakhr El-Matri President Ben Ali's son-in-law attended a reception hosted by the Ambassador May 26. He stayed for two hours talking with a wide variety of the guests, especially the Americans. He made a point of asking who he should know and stay in contact with at the Embassy.

He was a little more reserved with the Tunisian guests, speaking with them but only briefly before moving on. His English was quite good and he clearly enjoyed using it. In general, he presented himself in a low key, genial unassuming manner even though his presence was clearly marked by the guests.

2. (C) El-Matri's profile has been on the rise lately. He was on the cover of the May 25 Jeune Afrique after purchasing Dar Assabah publishing house, which publishes two of Tunisia's main newspapers Assabah and Le Temps, thus adding to his media empire which already includes the Quranic Zeitouna radio. He sat directly behind President Ben Ali during the final soccer match of the Presidential Cup, and he was present when Minister of State and Presidential Advisor Ben Dhia spoke to a gathering of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) in Sousse April 26 about government's plans for the upcoming Presidential elections.

3. (SBU) During the reception El-Matri discussed his plans for Assabah and Le Temps saying he had hired a French firm to revamp the look of the papers and that he had hired Faisal Battout, the AFP Bureau Chief in Doha, to be the new Editor of Assabah. He should arrive in Tunis around 15 June.

(Comment: If Battout, who is well known to PA, is allowed to operate independently this is a good sign for the newspapers.) He also mentioned, in the context of discussing the AMIDEAST program, that he had spoken to the President about the importance of English language instruction.

4. (C) On a personal note: El-Matri revealed that he liked exercising but not running. He said he was trying to lose weight, and he drank Diet Coke at the reception. He also said he was starting a new exercise regime and used that as a reason why he had stopped smoking a water pipe. He went out of his way to ask if his new mansion under construction next to the Residence was blocking the sea view of any of his neighbors. El-Matri visited Canada in May during which his wife gave birth to a daughter and a new Canadian citizen. He also purchased a villa at 70 Place Belvedere, Westmont Canada, previous owner Mrs. Leslie Osmond for approximately 2.5 million Canadian dollars.

5. (S/NF) Comment: By accepting the Ambassador's invitation and by staying as long as he did El-Matri was showing his interest in expanding his contacts with the Embassy. Notably El-Matri also invited the Ambassador out to lunch or dinner, which the Ambassador accepted. The Embassy extended the invitation to Sakhr El-Matri in the context of an event targeted at the Ambassador's neighbors in Sidi Bou Said and with the intent to get to know him better.

Godec

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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S E C R E T TUNIS 000314

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SIPDIS

DOD FOR OSD (DASD WHELAN) AND OSD/ISA/NESA
STATE FOR PM/RSAT(DANIELEWSKI) NEA/MAG (HAYES)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2019

TAGS: MASS, MARR, PREL, TS

SUBJECT: US-TUNISIAN JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION PRODUCES
BETTER TUNISIAN BRIEFINGS BUT MANY DETAILS STILL LACKING

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) The May 11-13 US-Tunisian Joint Military Commission (JMC) saw productive exchanges on a variety of topics relating to bilateral military cooperation. The Tunisians were more forthcoming than they have been in recent years about their priorities with respect to military assistance needs, although they did not provide a comprehensive planning document laying out these priorities in detail and how they intend to use Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and other means to meet them. In the coming weeks, the Mission will review FMF and other US assistance here in light of the JMC and other developments in US-Tunisian bilateral relations, including issues related to the American Cooperative School of Tunis. End Summary.

Setting the Stage

2. (C) On May 7, prior to the formal commencement of the 24th US-Tunisian JMC, DASD Whelan met with Defense Minister Morjane. In this meeting, both Morjane and Whelan expressed appreciation for the long-standing military cooperation between our two countries, noting our historic relationship and friendly ties. Morjane was particularly grateful for the provision of ground surveillance radar (GSR) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which will help the Tunisian

military patrol the border. Whelan made clear that the United States Government was pleased to be able to help Tunisia better secure its borders. She noted, however, that the current economic environment would have an impact on foreign assistance. "We may not be able to sustain" current levels of military assistance to Tunisia, she explained.

3. (C) DASD Whelan underscored that the economic crisis made it all the more important for the USG to understand Tunisian military needs and priorities, explaining that such information is critical to US planning and delivery of military assistance. In addition, she addressed the need to have regular communications, to ensure that the US-Tunisian military partnership stays strong and effective. (Note: She did not specifically mention US disappointment over the conditions imposed by the GOT on the ATLAS DROP exercise, but it was clear that this incident was symptomatic of the problem to which she was alluding.) Morjane agreed, but noted that Tunisia's relatively small military imposes constraints on the number of commitments that they can take on. He specified that Tunisia has 11 joint military commissions with various countries, including one just created with Belgium and noted that during the last year the Tunisian military had taken part in over 300 military activities, including 100 days worth of activities with the United States. Whelan said the United States was interested more in the quality of the relationship, rather than the quantity of joint activities.

4. (S/NF) Following their 30-minute meeting, DASD Whelan and DefMi Morjane adjourned to his office for a restricted meeting, which also included Ambassador Godec on the US side;

and Director General for Military Security Brigadier General Mohamed Meddeb, Colonel Abdelkader Adouni, and Major Chiheb Khelifa on the Tunisian side. Morjane and Whelan repeated the themes addressed in the broader meeting, with Whelan underscoring that the USG needs more precision about Tunisia's requirements to better guard against the threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. General Meddeb opined that better military-military intelligence cooperation would help. He recalled that in the 1980's the United States used to provide daily updates about Soviet ship movements in the Mediterranean, suggesting that this kind of information-sharing was an appropriate model. Whelan said the US side would seek to strengthen this area.

Productive Working Sessions

5. (C) The JMC itself proceeded as planned, with positive but quite general exchanges in the plenary, with more detailed briefings in the Subcommittees on Security Assistance and on Military Cooperation. (Note: The minutes of these sessions have been emailed to PM/RSAT and NEA/MAG.) US participants described the Tunisian briefings as "more forthcoming than ever," but still not quite reaching the level of precision that the US side requires for planning purposes.

Specifically, the Tunisians did not provide a comprehensive five-year planning document laying out in detail their military assistance priorities and how they intend to use FMF and other means to meet them.

6. (SBU) Highlights of the working sessions included:

- A briefing on the Tunisian Army's top military assistance priorities, i.e., light weapons, individual protection, NVGs, GPS, laser range finders, aiming point devices, HWMW and shelters, chemical gear, EOD gear, parachutes, and support vehicles.
- A briefing on the Tunisian Air Force's top priorities, i.e., upgrading F5 and T53 engines and C130 pilot training.

Secondary priority was given to EDA C130H and SH-60, J85-21C engines for the F5 and T56 engines for C130, sustainment of the UH-1, upgrade for the C130B, a UH-1H simulator, and initial pilot training for graduating cadets.

-- The Tunisian side also requested as a top priority two Protector Class (or equivalent 25 meter) coastal patrol boats, which the Tunisian military intends to supplement with an additional two coastal patrol boats by FY12.

-- The Tunisian side briefed on the Tunisian medical organization, requesting US assistance for its intensive care unit and burn unit, as well as in the area of aerospace physiology.

-- The Tunisian side briefed on the military's civilian development/engineering project in R'Jim Maatoug, located south of Kebili. Both in Morjane's plenary statement and in the more detailed briefing in the military cooperation subcommittee, the project was held up as a model for potential US-Tunisian cooperation in humanitarian assistance.

The US side expressed openness to considering future projects in conjunction with the Tunisian Ministry of Defense along the lines of the R'Jim Maatoug project, which the Italians helped fund.

-- On the US side, the Tunisians welcomed the briefing on the Scan Eagle Unmanned Air System, noting that a site survey by the US program office would be required to better assess support requirements. After repeated requests, the Tunisians permitted a site visit along the Tunisian-Algerian border to review issues related to deployment of GSRs and UAVs. The Tunisians were invited to observe as part of AFRICOM's mil-mil program the US Marine Corps exercise Mohave Viper at 29 Palms training area in California June 1-4, 2009 where USMC employs Scan Eagle UAV as part of its predeployment training. (Note: The Tunisian Military accepted this offer on May 20, sending the Embassy the names of two Air Force officers.)

Comment

7. (C) Although the session was productive, and the Tunisian side more forthcoming than it has been in recent years about its priorities with respect to military assistance needs, there was still an absence of precision in some of the Tunisian briefings. In the coming weeks, the Mission will review FMF and other US assistance here in light of the JMC and other developments in US-Tunisian bilateral relations, including the future of the American Cooperative School of Tunis. End Comment.

8. (SBU) DASD Whelan did not have a chance to clear this cable prior to departing Post.

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6188

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000223

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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/FO - HUDSON; NEA/MAG; NEA/SCA/EX;

STATE ALSO FOR A/OPR/OS - CAMERON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2019

TAGS: ASCH, OFDP, PREL, TS

SUBJECT: GOT OFFERS NEGOTIATIONS ON AMERICAN SCHOOL, BUT

SLAPS AMBASSADOR'S WRIST FOR "POLITICIZING" THE ISSUE

REF: TUNIS 217 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S/NF) In back-to-back meetings at the Foreign Ministry today the Ambassador was given a letter from Foreign Minister Abdallah to NEA AA/S Feltman offering negotiations to resolve the American Cooperative School in Tunis (ACST) tax issue.

The letter emphasized that the GOT wants to maintain friendly relations with the United States and views the school tax issue as a technical, fiscal matter. The Ambassador welcomed this opening and the prospect of negotiations, but asked the MOF to rescind the final tax decree to prevent the school's closure. His Tunisian interlocutors were dismissive about the looming May 23 deadline for payment, saying, "No one wants to close the school." On his way back to the Embassy, the Ambassador was asked to return to the Ministry. The Minister's Special Assistant, Mohamed Lessir, who had been in the first meeting, reprimanded the Ambassador for having politicized the issue by contacting several third parties, including the African Development Bank and European Ambassadors. Lessir also took issue that GRPO had raised the ACST matter with its security contacts. The Ambassador firmly rejected the assertion that it was the United States that had politicized the issue. He explained that his contacts with key stakeholders were only natural, given the schools impending forced closure. The content of these meetings represents the first clear

indication that the GOT is ready to negotiate. We should take them up on their offer, and quickly. We have forwarded to NEA/MAG a draft text for Acting A/S Feltman. End Summary.

FM Response to AA/S Feltman Letter

2. (C) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Chief of Staff Mahmoud Khemiri summoned the Ambassador for the second day in a row to discuss the ACST issue. Once again accompanied by Special Assistant to the Minister and Director General for Europe Mohamed Lessir, as well as Elyes Kasri, Director General for the Americas and Asia, Khemiri presented a letter from Foreign Minister Abdallah to AA/S Feltman, responding to AA/S Feltman's April 6 letter to Appointed Ambassador Mansour in Washington. The text of the original Arabic letter, along with Embassy's unofficial translation, have been emailed to NEA/MAG. The FM's letter :

- emphasized the over 200 years of friendly relations the United States and Tunisia have enjoyed and noted that the GOT is keen on that friendship continuing;
- argued that the tax matter faced by ACST is a fiscal and "purely technical" issue with no political aspect, and noted surprise that AA/S Feltman's letter alluded to possible impacts on bilateral relations, which "cannot be impacted by these technical issues";
- expressed the readiness of the GOT to receive fiscal and legal experts from the United States as soon as possible for discussions with Tunisian fiscal authorities about the ACST issue; and
- confirmed that the GOT is ready for dialogue to search for a solution concerning the fiscal status of the school and the lease contract in the framework of an agreement that clarifies the rights and duties of all parties.

Let's Negotiate

3. (C) The Ambassador thanked the Chief of Staff for the response, noting that he would transmit it to Washington. He reiterated that the United States stands ready to take part in negotiations with the GOT to resolve the issue. He emphasized, however, that such negotiations should take place in the context of discussions to clarify the school's status, and with an appreciation of 50 years of diplomatic exchanges and practice regarding the school. In addition, the Finance Ministry should, as a preliminary step, rescind its unilateral final tax decree. All of these issues could be taken up -- and resolved amicably -- in the context of bilateral negotiations.

What Deadline?

4. (C) Lessir asked whether ACST planned to exercise its right to sue the GOT. The Ambassador demurred, noting that the school is still weighing its options. The Ambassador reiterated though, that ACST will not be able to come up with even the approximately 4 million Tunisian Dinars that the MOF has said is not subject to deferment in the case of a legal suit. Lessir was dismissive about the looming deadline, noting that there are "several weeks" before May 23. The Ambassador pointed out that the GOT would have the legal authority to padlock the property and seize any valuables in the case of non-payment beginning on May 23.

Take II

5. (S/NF) As the Ambassador was on his way back to the Embassy, he received an urgent phone call to return to the Ministry for a meeting with the Foreign Minister. As it turned out, the second meeting was with Lessir, who was clearly performing on instruction from the Minister. Lessir, adopting a very serious tone, said that information had "come to the Ministry's attention" suggesting that the Ambassador had been in contact with the African Development Bank, other Ambassadors, and parents of ACST schoolchildren. He reprimanded the Ambassador for these contacts, noting that the German Ambassador had already called him to make an "urgent" intervention on this issue. Lessir also expressed displeasure over the fact that GRPO had raised the ACST issue with security contacts. These acts were unfortunate, Lessir said, and constituted politicization of what was a "purely technical" issue. This should have been a last resort, he said, and we're not yet at the point of last resort. The GOT's doors were always open, he continued. "We would have preferred to have kept these discussions between us."

Why? Why??

6. (C) Lessir said he couldn't understand why the United States take the discussion to third parties "Just tell me why," Lessir implored, dramatically. The Ambassador turned the tables on Lessir, saying, "Just tell me why, when there are so many communications between the Embassy and the GOT on the school, including a 1984 MFA diplomatic note specifying that teachers' salaries are not subject to tax, why does this mean nothing?"

No Blame Here

7. (C) The Ambassador was unapologetic for his consultations with key stakeholders in ACST. He reminded Lessir that the school was facing imminent forced closure, due to its inability to pay even the down payment of the assessed arrears by May 23. In the face of this sword of Damocles, the school -- and the USG -- had no choice but to prepare for the worst case scenario -- the forced closure of the school.

It would have been irresponsible to have not consulted with key stakeholders. The Ambassador advised Lessir that consultations with parents have not yet taken place, but that many are already aware of the situation; a general meeting is planned for Friday, April 17. The Ambassador also rejected Lessir's assertion that the United States had politicized the issue. Notwithstanding the GOT's protestations that tax issue was a technical matter, it jeopardized the very existence of ACST, which made it a political matter for us.

The Ambassador pointed out that throughout the build-up of this crisis, he had repeatedly made clear to his Tunisian interlocutors that they were provoking a crisis.

Briefing European Ambassadors

8. (C) After the MFA meetings, the Ambassador informed the German and several other EU Ambassadors of the new

TUNIS 00000223 003 OF 003

developments. All welcomed the possibility of progress, but agreed that we need (collectively) to keep the pressure on the GOT to resolve the ACST issue once and for all.

Comment

9. (C) Lessir's theatrical performance, while tedious, is evidence that our actions in Washington and Tunis have finally gotten the GOT's attention. Moreover, as the Ambassador noted in his second meeting with Lessir, Abdallah's letter represents the first clear indication that the GOT is willing to negotiate with the goal of resolving this matter in a mutually agreeable fashion. We should take them up on this offer, but stick to the condition that the MOF first rescind the final tax decree. Post will transmit to NEA/MAG recommended language for a response to the Abdallah letter. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:

<http://www.state.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>

Godec

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6025

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 08 TUNIS 000129

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DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/ITA, DS/IP/NEA

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**SUBJECT: TUNIS SECURITY ENVIRONMENT PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE
(SEPM) SPRING 2009**

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (SBU) DEMONSTRATIONS

A. (SBU) ARE THERE ANY ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN COUNTRY CAPABLE OF CARRYING OUT SIGNIFICANT ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS?

The Government of Tunisia (GOT) prohibits demonstrations that are not pre-approved and is capable of controlling and dispersing one in the unlikely event one could be mustered without their knowledge. The only known group capable of implementing this type of demonstration would be the Tunisian labor union UGTT. The UGTT, which is neither ethnic nor religious, maintains a small square outside of its headquarters which they occasionally make use of to hold political rallies, which have included anti-American slogans in the past.

B. (SBU) HAVE THERE BEEN ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE COUNTRY WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS?

There have been no anti-American demonstrations in 2008 or 2009. The GOT is very protective of the area surrounding the Embassy and maintains a large uniformed and plainclothes police presence around the compound. There were many pro-Palestinian rallies across the country this year in reaction to events at Gaza. At these demonstrations, some anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric was allowed.

Witnesses also described a couple incidents of demonstrators burning Israeli and American flags. Historically, there were two small, peaceful government-sponsored demonstrations in solidarity with Lebanon in summer 2006. A few of the demonstrators shouted anti-American slogans and carried anti-American signs. After the Saddam Hussein execution in 2006, the UGTT had a small anti-American rally outside of its headquarters.

C. (SBU) HAVE DEMONSTRATIONS TAKEN PLACE NEAR OR IN FRONT OF U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES? No.

A small group of professional women from the Tunisian Association of Female Researchers assembled briefly outside of the main gate to the compound in January 2009 and displayed signs with the words "Stop the War in Gaza" on them. They were quickly outnumbered by local police who intervened before they reached the visitor access control point. They were allowed to present a petition to an embassy officer who accepted it on behalf of the Ambassador.

D. (SBU) WHAT IS THE AVERAGE SIZE OF AN ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATION? N/A

E. (SBU) ARE ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS USUALLY TRIGGERED BY U.S FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVES, MILITARY ACTIONS, OR BY DOMESTIC ISSUES? N/A

F. (SBU) ARE DEMONSTRATIONS GENERALLY VIOLENT OR PEACEFUL?

Demonstrations are generally peaceful and the GOT strives to ensure this by positioning large numbers of uniformed and plain clothes police officers in the demonstration areas.

However, economic unrest and unemployment led to several large-scale and prolonged demonstrations during the first six months of 2008 in the south-central area of Tunisia. There was violence reported as the demonstrators and the security services clashed in several cities, and the GOT cut off public access to the areas hardest hit and did not permit media reporting of the confrontations. See below (I.) for more details.

G. (SBU) IF VIOLENT, HAVE ANY DEMONSTRATIONS RESULTED IN DAMAGE TO USG PROPERTY OR INJURIES TO USG EMPLOYEES? No.

H. (SBU) IF VIOLENT, HAVE ANY DEMONSTRATORS EVER PENETRATED OUR PERIMETER SECURITY LINE? No.

I. (C) HAVE THERE BEEN ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE COUNTRY WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS? Yes.

Unemployment protests took place in south-central Tunisia in February, April and June of 2008, primarily in the towns of Gafsa, Redeyef, Kasserine, Um El Araies and Feriana. High unemployment, poverty, inflation and a lack of economic development in the mining region in the governorates of Gafsa and Kasserine sparked some of the largest demonstrations Tunisia has seen in years. Ministry of Interior (MOI) and Ministry of Defense (MOD) assets were deployed at various times to restore order. According to reports, police used live ammunition in response to the throwing of petrol bombs.

Some residents and supporters of the demonstrators rejected police claims, dismissing them as ex post facto rationalization for the excessive use of force by the security services. Two demonstrators were shot and killed and many more were wounded. Dozens of protesters were arrested and several senior labor leaders were arrested and subsequently sentenced to up to eight years in prison. Human rights organizations reported that security forces used tear gas, batons, water cannons and dogs to repress demonstrators, and even ransacked homes and businesses in retaliation. The Tunisian military was deployed to the city of Redeyef in June in an effort to end the violence.

J. (SBU) HAVE DEMONSTRATIONS TAKEN PLACE NEAR OR IN FRONT OF U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES? No.

K. (C) WHAT IS THE AVERAGE SIZE OF AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATION?

Public protests in Tunisia are rare. The demonstrations referred to above were confined to the mining region in south-central Tunisia in the governorates of Gafsa and Kasserine. The GOT strictly controls information and the private media practices self-censorship when reporting on matters sensitive to the GOT that could reflect negatively upon it. The GOT attempted to minimize the extent and nature of the demonstrations and initially would not even acknowledge them in

official communications. Areas were cordoned off from public access and attempts by Embassy officers to enter these areas were initially rebuffed by security forces at road blocks. However, some did reach Redeyef by utilizing back roads instead of the main highways.

Given the propensity of the GOT to control information, it is not possible to obtain official statistics on the size of the demonstrations. Unofficially, the numbers vary greatly depending on the source. Amateur video footage posted on YouTube suggested that the crowds consisted of more than one thousand persons.

L. (SBU) ARE DEMONSTRATIONS GENERALLY VIOLENT OR PEACEFUL?

Demonstrations are generally peaceful. The events in Gafsa and Kasserine last year prove that people will challenge authority even in a police state, when driven to do so in this instance by severe economic conditions. Over the time period from January until June, there were two deaths reported as a result of the unrest and the response from the security forces. The number of wounded cannot be ascertained because of the lack of credible information regarding the demonstrations.

M. (SBU) IF VIOLENT, HAVE ANY DEMONSTRATIONS RESULTED IN DAMAGE TO USG PROPERTY? No.

2. (SBU) MACRO CONFLICT CONDITIONS

A. (S/NF) IS THE HOST COUNTRY ENGAGED IN AN INTERSTATE OR INTRASTATE CONFLICT? (THIS MAY INCLUDE BATTLES BETWEEN ORGANIZED AND VIOLENT DRUG CARTELS).

There is no interstate or intrastate conflict involving the GOT. The GOT is very proactive in terms of its internal security and utilizes a broad definition of the term terrorist in the application of its interests. GOT security forces disrupted a terror cell in December 2006 and January 2007. Gun battles included two major skirmishes in Hammam Lif and Soliman in the greater Tunis area. The GOT has conveyed to Embassy officers they consider the cell responsible for these actions destroyed. The problems posed by the porous Algerian border were evidenced by the fact that six individuals had crossed into Tunisia undetected with the purported intent of conducting terrorist attacks.

Tunisia also faces illegal cross-border migration from Algeria and Libya to Europe. Criminal cartels, not necessarily based in Tunisia, continue to ferry illegal aliens through Tunisian territorial waters and are often intercepted by Tunisian naval/coast guard units. Recently, there have been increased reports of Tunisians attempting to emigrate illegally, most likely to Italy. Some have met with tragic results because of the poor condition of the boats, no provisions and no life vests. It is also probable these routes are also being used as a conduit for illegal drugs.

B. (SBU) IF AN INTRASTATE CONFLICT, IS IT AN INSURGENCY LIMITED TO A SPECIFIC REGION OR IS IT A COUNTRYWIDE CIVIL WAR? There is no intrastate conflict within Tunisia.

C. (SBU) IF LIMITED TO A SPECIFIC REGION, ARE ANY U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES LOCATED IN THIS REGION?

All U.S. diplomatic facilities are located in Tunis, Specifically the northern suburbs of Les Berges du Lac and Sidi Bou Said.

D. (S/NF) HAVE ANY OF THE FACTIONS INVOLVED IN INTRASTATE CONFLICTS SIGNALLED OR DEMONSTRATED AN ANTI-AMERICAN ORIENTATION?

The GOT claims that the group they disrupted in January 2007 had plans to attack the U.S. and U.K. embassies and select personnel. However, the GOT has not shared any tangible evidence of this to date, nor was any such evidence presented in their trial in late 2007, although one defendant admitted that the group intended to target "crusader" sites. The GOT considers this cell destroyed.

3. (SBU) HOST COUNTRY CAPABILITIES

A. (SBU) ARE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES (LEA) PROFESSIONAL AND WELL-TRAINED?
Yes.

LEA's are professional and adequately trained. Police officers receive one year of general police academy Training and one year follow-on specialized training (i.e. VIP protection, criminal investigations, motorbike patrol).

Police officers who demonstrate high proficiency in their second year of training are recruited for special units (i.e. special forces, anti-terrorist, quick response teams). Local traffic police, a separate entity from other LEA's, also receive specialized training.

The GOT utilizes large numbers of uniformed police officers as a visible deterrent to crime and by extension, terrorism, particularly in the capital and in popular tourist areas. In sensitive areas, such as near government buildings or even the U.S. Embassy, they also utilize plain-clothes officers to supplement their capabilities.

B. (C) HAVE THEY BEEN TRAINED BY U.S. AGENCIES? IF SO, PLEASE ELABORATE ON EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAINING.

Yes, but not recently. DS/ATA has had a long relationship with the GOT, however, the last DS/ATA training occurred in August 2004. Thirty-two GOT officials participated in an airport security management seminar. Since then, DS/ATA has offered a variety of training opportunities, which were either turned down at the last minute or deadlines for participation were not met. The Department of Defense through Embassy Tunis' Office of Security Cooperation has been more successful in providing training to Ministry of Defense personnel but the Ministry of Defense is prohibited from performing police activities.

C. (C) ARE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES CONFRONTED WITH SERIOUS, WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION INSIDE THEIR AGENCIES?

It is widely believed that corruption is a problem within law enforcement agencies, but it is practically impossible to substantiate because the GOT does not release such information. In early 2004, the GOT created the position of Chief Inspector of the Internal Security Forces and Customs within the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to investigate corruption and other law enforcement abuses.

Little information about the activities of this group or any other corruption within the Tunisian law enforcement community is officially released or able to be verified, therefore it is difficult if not impossible to assess the level of internal corruption. There are widespread reports, however, of traffic police soliciting bribes to forego issuing traffic tickets.

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D. (S) ARE THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES PROFESSIONAL AND CAPABLE OF DETERRING TERRORIST ACTIONS? Yes.

The GOT maintains an active internal and modest external intelligence network focused on preserving civil peace and order within Tunisia's borders. Through extensive use of informants and surveillance, the GOT produces intelligence-related information and aggressively addresses any perceived threat to national security and regime stability.

In order to further combat domestic terrorism, the Ministry of Interior and Local Development (MOI) has centralized terrorism investigations in its Tunis office. The police and paramilitary National Guard divisions of the MOI have each established an antiterrorism director to coordinate terrorism investigations and share information more easily.

E. (S/NF) HAVE THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES BEEN COOPERATIVE WITH U.S. EMBASSY REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION AND SUPPORT?

Although the intelligence services continue to streamline their liaison decision-making processes, the GOT continues to impede dissemination of information outside of the GOT, even during a threat. In fact, internal controls within the GOT limit how information is shared between the office of the President, MOI, Security Services and MOD. From the outset of the MOI encounter with the terrorists in Hammam Lif (southeast suburban Tunis) on December 23, 2006 until the final confrontation in Soliman (farther southeast of Tunis) on January 3, 2007, the GOT did not/not share any information concerning the threat against the U.S. Embassy with anyone in the Embassy despite specific formal and informal requests from the Ambassador, DCM and other section heads.

Originally, they stated that the incident involved organized crime elements. On January 5, 2007, the GOT informed the Ambassador that the U.S. and U.K. Embassies were among the group's intended targets. One week later, the GOT made a public statement to that effect. Gradually, the GOT provided more specific information regarding these events. Through a concerted effort, relations and information sharing have improved but the majority of information originates from the U.S. side.

On criminal investigations, official requests to the MOI regarding information on criminal activities, specifically incidents against Americans continue to go unanswered or to be delayed. Criminal Leads have been passed with no response in years past. This does not necessarily mean that no action was taken, but no report or follow-up were shared with RSO.

Recently, the Legal Attach based in Rabat has had all requests for meetings canceled or postponed, even though multiple dates had been suggested in the Diplomatic Note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting the meetings. One letters rogatory requesting interviews with the FBI was granted in 2007.

F. (S/NF) ASSUMING THERE HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANT TERRORIST THREATS IN RECENT YEARS, HAVE HOST COUNTRY SECURITY SERVICES BEEN ABLE TO SCORE ANY MAJOR ANTI-TERRORISM SUCCESSES?

Beyond the December 2006/January 2007 incidents, the GOT has in some cases accepted repatriation of captured Tunisian extremists who face prosecution for violation of Tunisia's anti-terrorist laws. They are promptly sentenced upon their return. Two Guantanamo detainees were transferred in summer 2007 and ten more remain in custody there.

G. (SBU) HAS HOST COUNTRY BEEN RESPONSIVE (RE: TIMELINESS AND ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES) TO EMBASSY REQUESTS FOR PROTECTIVE SECURITY? Yes.

The GOT provided the Embassy with significant protective resources and security support for many high level visits in 2008, including the Secretary of State and several Congressional delegations. The GOT officers are professional and conscientious. Provided the request is scheduled in advance, the GOT provides assistance to include motorcade and traffic support, and also motorbike and foot patrols (uniform and undercover). When the Secretary of State stayed in a beach-front hotel, there were maritime patrols as well.

When demonstrations began occurring across the country in support of the Palestinians in January of 2009, the police presence at the Embassy was visibly increased even though the possibility of a spontaneous demonstration was extremely low.

We do not expect a change in the GOT's responsiveness to our requests for support.

H. (SBU) HOW DOES THE EMBASSY ASSESS THE OVERALL SECURITY AT MAJOR AIRPORTS IN THE COUNTRY? (EXCELLENT; VERY GOOD; GOOD/AVERAGE; POOR)

The Embassy would assess airport security as good/average.

The GOT is working to expand its airport services and hopes to be a major African hub; therefore the GOT has increased airport security overall. Numerous uniformed officers are positioned on the roadway in front of the main terminal and there are also checkpoints for traffic entering the terminal area.

The most recent information regarding airport safety available to the RSO is from 2007 when officials from the United Kingdom visited the Tunis/Carthage International Airport. The officials indicated that the security of the airport changed depending on the personnel on duty. Based on observations of our personnel this is considered accurate, as at times the police have ratcheted up their level of inspection of persons entering the airport without explanation.

Additionally, a number of visitors to Tunisia arrive via cruise ships. Since Tunisia is a popular destination for UK citizens, UK Department for Transport representatives visited the La Goulette commercial seaport, also in 2007. They determined the security at Tunis' major seaport to be good/average. They echoed the airport safety officials' 2007 statements in regards to the attentiveness of police personnel on site.

I. (S) HOW EFFECTIVE ARE CUSTOMS AND IMMIGRATION CONTROLS AGENCIES? (EFFECTIVE; AVERAGE; INEFFECTIVE)

Average. During a visit to the Port of Rades, Tunisia's Main container port, by CODEL Costello in August 2007, the Director General of the Merchant Marine and Ports Office (OMMP) and the OMMP's Director of Port Security and Safety noted that the Port is in full compliance with the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code and has been recognized for security best practices. The delegation was given a demonstration of the Port's container scanning procedures. The OMMP claimed that 100 percent of all imported and exported containers are scanned. The OMMP also shared photographic evidence of x-ray images that led to the GOT's interdiction of several smuggling incidents involving weapons, drugs, and illegal immigrants.

Immigration controls appear to be effective at international airports and we have no specific evidence to the contrary.

Land borders are considered porous. GOT security elements are specifically concerned about their western border with Algeria.

As stated above, Tunisia also faces illegal cross-border migration from Algeria and Libya to Europe. Criminal cartels continue to ferry illegal aliens through Tunisian territorial waters and are often intercepted by Tunisian naval/coast guard units and merchant vessels on their way to Italian islands. Tunisia is not typically the launching point, however.

J. (S/NF) HOW EFFECTIVE ARE BORDER PATROL FORCES? (EFFECTIVE; AVERAGE; INEFFECTIVE)

Average. The GOT continues to patrol its border areas with aging equipment although additional refurbished UH-1H helicopters have been received and put into service. There have been ten helicopters received since 2007. Its limited budget hinders the national guard's border patrol capabilities. The GOT continues to request US assistance in obtaining new equipment for this purpose, specifically helicopters, sensors, night vision goggles and spare parts.

Along the Algerian border north of the Sahara Desert, the paramilitary National Guard is stationed as a first line of defense with the army five kilometers inland for support.

The National Guard relies on static posts and both forces conduct continuous patrols. The army operates a small number of ground surveillance radars which provide limited coverage due to both their inadequate numbers and the age of the equipment. The military exclusively patrols the more porous southern Sahara borders with Algeria and Libya and relies on the same type of aged radar equipment. Security is often increased along the borders around major holidays.

Two Austrian nationals were kidnapped in February 2008 while visiting the southwestern desert. The GOT alleged they had strayed over the border into Algeria when they were abducted but subsequent debriefings since their release contradict that official explanation, leading us to believe the action took place in Tunisia. The Austrians were released unharmed in Mali after a large ransom was paid.

INDIGENOUS TERRORISM

4. (SBU) ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORIST GROUPS

A. (S/NF) ARE THERE INDIGENOUS, ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORIST GROUPS IN COUNTRY?

The group that targeted the Embassy is believed to be the linked to Al Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Based on publicized arrests and capture of Tunisian Islamic extremists involved in support and execution of extremist activities in Spain, Belgium, Italy, Bosnia, Denmark, Iraq and the trial of thirty terrorists allegedly planning domestic attacks, one must conclude there are further anti-American elements in Tunisia who support violence against the U.S. presence in Tunisia and Iraq.

The support of Islamic extremism appears to be linked to the global jihad movement. One alarming fact associated with the December 2006/January 2007 incidents indicates that the group of six who illegally entered Tunisia via the Algerian border in April 2006 was able to recruit over thirty more individuals for their cause in only six weeks.

In the past, Tunisian terrorist groups who were known to be active outside of Tunisia and who have espoused anti-American views, such as the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG aka Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group) and the Tunisian Islamic Front (TIF), may still have supporters in Tunisia although it is unlikely.

The GOT contends that these groups are totally shut down.

They are illegal and the GOT has arrested and imprisoned members.

Although the GOT does not publicly acknowledge their existence, it can be safely assumed that terrorists and terrorist sympathizers are present in Tunisia. It should also be noted that the GOT banned the Islamist party an-Nahdha (Renaissance), which it considers to be a terrorist organization. Several an-Nahdha leaders were sentenced to lengthy jail terms in the 1980s. Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of an-Nahdha, lives in exile in London.

B. (SBU) IF YES, HOW MANY? 3. PLEASE NAME GROUPS. See above

C. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS CARRIED OUT ANTI-AMERICAN ATTACKS WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS? No.

D. (SBU) WERE ANY OF THESE LETHAL ATTACKS? N/A

E. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS ATTACKED U.S. DIPLOMATIC TARGETS? No.

F. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS ATTACKED U.S. BUSINESS, U.S. MILITARY, OR U.S.-RELATED TARGETS? No.

G. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS LIMITED THEIR ATTACKS TO SPECIFIC REGIONS OR DO THEY OPERATE COUNTRY-WIDE? N/A

H. (SBU) IF ATTACKS ARE LIMITED TO REGIONS, ARE THERE ANY U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES LOCATED IN THESE REGIONS? N/A

5. (SBU) OTHER INDIGENOUS TERRORIST GROUPS

A. (SBU) ARE THERE OTHER INDIGENOUS TERRORIST GROUPS (NOT ANTI-AMERICAN) IN COUNTRY? None known.

B. (SBU) IF YES, HOW MANY? PLEASE NAME GROUPS. N/A

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C. (SBU) HAVE GROUPS CARRIED OUT ATTACKS IN THE CAPITAL OR IN AREAS WHERE U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES ARE LOCATED?

No.

D. (SBU) WERE ATTACKS LETHAL AND/OR INDISCRIMINATE? N/A

E. (SBU) HAVE THERE BEEN ANY AMERICANS KILLED OR INJURED IN THESE ATTACKS? N/A

TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

6. (SBU) TRANSNATIONAL TERRORIST INDICTORS

A. (S/NF) ARE THERE ANY FOREIGN TERRORIST GROUP THAT HAVE A PRESENCE IN COUNTRY? Yes.

PROVID NAMES: AQIM and other pro-Islamic insurgent symathizers.

B. (S) HOW DOES POST ASSESS THIS PRESNCE? IS IT AN OPERATIONAL CELL? FINANCIAL CELL SUPPORT CELL? PROPAGANDA CELL?

Based on th direct threat against the Embassy mentioned abov and the presence of Tunisians actively participatng in terrorist activity around the world (i.e. adrid train bombings, Iraqi suicide attacks, Guatanamo detainees), operational, financial nd support cells exist in Tunisia.

Without specific evidence to the contrary, presence of propaganda cells can be assumed.

C. (C) IS THE HOST GOVERNMENT SYMPATHETIC TO THESE GROUPS?

No. The GOT actively pursues these groups, as they are a threat tothe current regime and its economic base - tourism.

D. (S) ARE THERE SUSPECT NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS) IN THE COUNTRY THAT HAVE A RELATINSHIP WITH ANY OF THESE GROUPS?

A popular, no-militant and influential NGO is the Da'Wa Al-Taligh. This Islamic NGO, which has been present in Tunisia since the mid-1970's, has been operating hroughout the countryside and in urban neighborhoods, urging strict observance of Koranic teachins. The Embassy suspects that sme elements of the Da'Wa may use this organization as a cover to recruit youths for extremist activities.

E. (SBU) ARE THERE ANY ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN COUNTRY THAT ARE SYMPATHETIC TO THESE GROUPS?

Yes, some Arab nationalists and Islamic sympathizers in Tunisia would support groups with radical Arab and Muslim causes.

F. (S/NF) HOW DOES POST ASSESS THE LEVEL, INTENT, AND SCOPE OF HOSTILE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES (IRAN, IRAQ, SYRIA, SERBIA, SUDAN, ET. AL.) IN COUNTRY RELATIVE TO POTENTIAL ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORIST ACTS?

Hostile intelligence services exist in Tunisia; however, it is difficult to assess their abilitis. Their ability to conduct acts of terrorism oreven conduct intelligence operations are cnstrained due to their limited resources and the strict covert and overt Tunisian surveillance against foreign missions.

G. (S/NF) HOW DOES POST ASSESS THE AVAILABILITY OF WEAPONS AND EXPLOSIVES IN COUNTRY OR FROM NEARBY COUNTRIES FOR HOSTILE TERRORIST ELEMENTS?

The GOT would argue that it has excellent control of information and intelligence that minimizes the ability of hostile groups to smuggle and transport weapons and explosives. The sandy desert borders shared with Algeria and Libya combined with the aging border patrol equipment provide an opportunity for entry of illegal munitions. GOT raids and encounters in December 2006 and January 2007 produced a variety of automatic weapons (Kalashnikovs) and explosive ordnance (ammonium nitrate, TATP). The GOT informed the U.S.

Embassy that it found fifty to sixty kilograms of explosives fabricated in Tunisia. In 2007, to combat the fabrication of explosives in Tunisia, the GOT announced changes in the types of fertilizers that are permitted for use in country.

The support systems that produced and transported these weapons from the border regions throughout the country indicate that it is not as difficult as the GOT would have us believe. Further we cannot assume that the GOT has been able to seize all illegal weapons or explosives.

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