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Authority *NND 745023*

By *JF* NARA Date *2-29-08*

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June 18, 1943

TO: J.I.C.A. - COLONEL SHARP

#A-15

FROM: EXP. DET. G-3

SUBJECT: THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN TUNISIA

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Arabia W  
Fr. Br. 10*

The attached report comes to us from an Arabian source under  
date of June 1, 1943. Evaluation: C-3.

cc: Washington  
Files

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NOTES ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN TUNISIA AMONG THE NATIVES

June 1, 1943

SOURCE: Arab (through G-3)

EVALUATION: C-3

Before the Allies disembarked in Algeria, the political situation in Tunisia was far from being satisfactory. The arrival of Moncef Bey on the throne marked the beginning of the reign of a prince who loved justice and who wished to help his people to obtain reforms, for which the Destourians had shown themselves to be the just champions.

Moncef was the son of Naceur Bey; he had already been arrested by the French Government during a fairly serious crisis. He had retained a certain bitterness toward France and when he came to the throne he took up active politics (which was not customary with former beys).

Many demands for reform were addressed to the Resident General, Admiral Esteve, who did not reply immediately. This was the cause of a famous incident at the Bardo. Moncef Bey, on an official visit on the occasion of the Feast of Aid el Seghair, began a violent tirade at the top of his voice (he is deaf), criticising all the bases of Tunisian policy. This unfortunate incident, at which General Barre was present, marked the beginning of the opposition between the Court and the Residence.

The Allies disembarked at Algiers. The Germans launched their strikes on Tunis. The Moslem world was terrified at the beginning; the intellectuals and the bourgeois remained neutral; the crowd composed of natives from the poor quarters cheered frantically the German soldiers from the aeroplanes. They have always admired (German) military force. This same crowd of bootblacks and riffraff cheered in Algeria: "Vive les Allies" - "Give us biscuits!" etc. This unfortunate manifestation irritated the French in Tunisia, who put the whole Moslem world in the same "sack". However, some natives did not hide their fears and their dislike of the German occupation. Prince Hassine, the confidant of the Bey, his brother, and Chenik, manifested their sympathy for the Allies and the hope they would arrive in Tunisia.

Thus, had the Allies arrived in Tunis in November, they would have found thousands of Arabs to cheer them. But the Germans came and stayed six months. To understand how the Germans obtained such wonderful results one must understand the psychology of the Tunisian.

1. The Tunisian is susceptible to exterior marks of deference.
2. The Tunisian hates Italian and French colonization.
3. The Tunisian is very impressionable and easy to convince.
4. The Tunisian is fundamentally anti-Jewish.

The Germans used a very correct approach with the natives, and did not differentiate between the Europeans and the natives; in fact, on the contrary, the German soldiers ate in native houses, petting the baby, etc. These poor people compared the Germans favorably with the Frenchmen, who did not know how to treat them.

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The reforms the Tunisians had asked for at the outset were quite reasonable: more openings for the young educated Arab on the same basis as the European in the Administration, etc. They never obtained them - the French seemed to adopt a policy toward the Italians or the Jews, but not toward them.

The Tunisian students complained that everyone - Jews, Italians, Maltese - had positions, but they had to look for a job at 1,000 francs per month and keep a family on it. So they took up politics and many became Destourians. Those who were more audacious, and who thought that with French citizenship they could be the vanguard of European progress, were bitterly deceived. Neither the French nor the Moslems admitted them completely into their society, and could not work, marry, or even die in peace. France did not even protect those who had made so many sacrifices, victims of their own courage and enthusiasm. So the natives warned their co-religionaries not to approach the French, who would only persecute them. The breach between the French and natives became ever wider. The Tunisian, on the other hand, had serious faults which the French held against him.

1. His laziness and nonchalance.
2. His political demoralization; exemplified by the Caid and administrative officers.
3. His technical inexperience.
4. His half-fanatical way of thinking.

Unfortunately in some ways, it was not the Arab who adopted French characteristics, but the Frenchman who acquired native traits. Many Frenchmen are lazy, full of stupid prejudices. This excuses the native, who cannot improve his situation when his master is like himself.

The Arab does not consider himself an inferior, as the Frenchman does; hence, all the trouble. As a result, the native easily condemns the whole of France and everything that is great in France.

The hatred for Italian colonization is even more flagrant. To protect himself from the Frenchman and the Italian, the native approaches and cheers the Germans. The Germans allow black market operations, pay well, new fortunes are made, and all the Jewish tricks are adopted by the Arabs and backed by the Germans.

The Tunisian makes money, creates trouble, and is an artist at disorganization. Lately he has created committees, governments, volunteered for the Defense Passive. In all these activities he has shown that he is not yet capable of governing himself.

The Tunisian is like a woman, impressionable, believing any lie if it is printed in black and white. German propaganda is always written in thousands of leaflets.

Another question which separated the Allies and the Arabs is anti-Semitism. In Tunisia the Jewish problem is immense and there are always thousands of supporters whenever Germany persecutes the Jews.

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The Arab is anti-Jewish, not in a sentimental or religious way, but in an economic way. In a country where there are insufficient strictly Tunisian banks, the Arab, always careless where money is concerned, borrows money from the Jew at rates which ruin him. The Arab has to go to the Jew because he is insufficiently paid, so he feels ill-used between the two. Many realize that the arrival of the Americans will bring a better economic situation into the country. But the propaganda distributed by enemy agents states that the Americans will only help the French and the Jews.

What has the Arab been doing while two armies have been fighting and aeroplanes bombing the towns? They are detached and feel they are neutral. I saw an amazing scene from an Arab farm while the battle of Hammam Lif was still raging. The Germans had mounted a gun on the perch and had been killed in the garden. The Arab family was sitting quietly on the verandah. They are uncenscious of danger and fatalists. They will cross the lines and go right through mined territory in order to do business. They were happy - food was better, they were free to say and do as they pleased.

But the war went on, the battle of Tebourba stopped the Allies' advance on Tunis, but the Germans were up to their knees in mud at Mateur. Then began a war of Propaganda, Patrols, and intelligence, which lasted many months, and in which the Arab played a considerable part. The Germans paid well and organized an almost perfect Intelligence Service. They looted and the Arabs looted with them, mostly French farms, but Arab farms as well. In general, all farms which were abandoned were looted. Sometimes if the owner remained he was killed, whether he was an Arab or French.

The Frenchman now is too inclined to think that the Arab looted him and forgets that all were pillaged. The Frenchman for many years has cultivated his property, underpaid, at the rate of 10 francs a day, his Arab workmen, and makes money every year. The war mattered little to him before - he did not mind the loss of Alsace-Lorraine or that the French in France were starving - as long as he had his farm. Now he says, "The Arabs loot and pillage; we must kill them all."

The Arab who left his farm at the last moment says, "I have been pillaged. It was the will of Allah."

Two peoples - two different conceptions.

As time went on the cost of living went up, the Germans carried away everything in the country, the Arabs began to see they had been tricked. Then began a movement among the Arabs which was pro-Ally. Among the more important Arab families there were many who were always pro-Ally. Had a Gallup poll been made a few days before the Allies arrived in Tunis, it would have given the following results:

1. Among the rich Arab families

75 % pro-Ally  
5 % pro-German  
20% indifferent

)  
( But 75% Anti-French  
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2. Among the poor people

25% pro-Ally  
75% pro-German

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The Allied offensive began and the Germans were beaten back to the sea in 3 days, to the great astonishment of the Arabs. They were pleased: - at last the Americans would really help them. On the contrary, they watched the French make an offensive against their people - the Bey, their idol, was removed. They went into mourning for 3 days. They shut their shops and prayed in their homes, while the Jews stole and were sarcastic, and their people were arrested on denunciations.

I have seen many regrettable scenes. At Sfax a notable person was beaten up by 10 Italian Jews who had escaped from Tripoli and joined the Gaullist troops. They carried away all his money and cattle, a theft of more than 200,000 francs.

At Biserta an Arab proprietor from whom the French Navy had taken 100 head of cattle, was kicked and told, "Get out, dirty Arab, these cattle belong to the Germans."

At Sidi Bou Zid the French colonials imposed a levy of 12 millions for the loss of all their animals and property, or they would be denounced at a Court Martial and treated like looters. The evening before an Arab had been shot in public. They gathered together 5 millions. One Arab family had all their daughters violated by drunken soldiers, excited by Jews.

The French colonial has finished his war with the Germans. He turns now against the Arab.

The Arabs see important families arrested on denunciations. They do not understand and think that the Allies intend to encourage the French in an anti-Arab policy.

They are slowly beginning to realize that it is only the French who persecute them, and say, "As we have to be governed by someone, let us have anyone, even the Ethiopians, rather than the French."

This is not exaggerated; all the Arabs are anti-French and now want to be in the American Army. They say now, "Luckily the English and Americans were here, or we should all have been massacred by the French." They also say, "If only the Americans would stay in the country."

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