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Review Essay: Why Tunisia?

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ISSUE DATE:

October 2018

VOLUME: 29

ISSUE: 4

PAGE NUMBERS: 166-175

Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly. By Safwan M. Masri. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 416 pages.

It is by now the received wisdom that the so-called Arab Spring has produced only one success story: the tiny North African nation of Tunisia. Conflicts rage in Syria, Yemen, and Libya; Egypt has returned to the bad old days in which mock elections convert generals into presidents; and everywhere there seems to have been a dramatic constriction of the Arab political imaginary. Where once it seemed reasonable to yearn for freedom, today a cheerless stability represents the extent of most Arabs' hopes. Against this uninviting backdrop, Tunisia looks like a triumph—even with its double-digit unemployment, a simmering Islamist insurgency, and a longstanding divide between a wealthy cosmopolitan coast and an impoverished provincial interior. That country of eleven million is the only one of the Arab League's 22 members that today earns a rating

of Free from Freedom House, and if the successful conclusion of its recent municipal elections is any indicator, its nascent democracy seems to be inching toward that enviable state known in the democratization literature as “consolidation.”

What is it about Tunisia? This by now oft-asked question has produced two broad answers. The first holds that Tunisia’s democratic transition was practically inevitable, the product of its large middle class, its proximity to Europe, its comparatively liberal culture, and a host of other factors besides. The second views Tunisia’s success as something of a minor miracle, wrought by talented politicians blessed with no small measure of luck. The first suggests that, among the polities touched by the Arab Spring, *only* Tunisia could have made it to democracy. The second suggests that what happened in Tunisia *could* have happened elsewhere, and may yet. Into this discussion comes Safwan Masri. He is clear about which side he is on. “The conditions for change in Tunisia,” he tells us, “were different. The ingredients present [there] [End Page 166] . . . have been many generations in the making. They cannot be easily replicated. Factors that are specific to Tunisia have led the country to where it is today” (p. 291).

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Masri knows Tunisia. Seduced, as so many of us have been, by the Arab world’s only democracy, he has made it his business to dive into that society, traveling there repeatedly and interviewing practically everyone who matters. The result is a deeply learned, sensitive, and searching book. Although social scientists will find much to

quibble with in the book's evidence, its argumentation, and its conclusion that the Arabs are doomed to a continuation of the doleful status quo, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly* is an essential document for those who wish to understand the Arab Spring's lone (if tentative) democratic victory.

Masri's central argument is simple: Tunisia is alone among Arab states in achieving democracy because it is culturally distinct from the rest of the Arab world. "Tunisia," Masri wants us to know, "has been non-Arab and non-Muslim longer than it has been either" (p.104). Its roots lie neither in the Arabian Peninsula nor in the birth of Islam, but in the city-state of Carthage, founded in the ninth century B.C.E. by seafaring Phoenicians from present-day Lebanon. Tunisia (or, more correctly, Carthage) became a great civilization (eventually writing a constitution that Aristotle allegedly thought "one of the best balanced in the Mediterranean world" [p. 96]). Nonetheless, it was conquered in the second century B.C.E. by the Romans (who, Masri tells us, helpfully dug a long trench to separate the province from what would later become turbulent Algeria). The area fell to the marauding Arabs only in the seventh century C.E., after fifty years of what Masri celebrates as "tenacious defiance" by the local Berber population (pp. 102–103). In Masri's telling, this long non-Arab, non-Muslim history—much like that long Roman trench—served to mark Tunisia as something apart from the rest of the Arab world and to insulate it from the ideological squalls—such as pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism—that, in his view, have devastated that world.

Much of the book is therefore dedicated to documenting the ways in which Tunisia is culturally different from its Arab brethren. One of the most important of these differences, writes Masri, lies in the Tunisian practice of Islam. He claims that a kinder, gentler, "Tunisian Islam" helps to explain "why the country has been able to follow a markedly different trajectory than other Arab Muslim countries" (p. 113). He attributes much of Tunisian Islam's alleged uniqueness to the Maliki Sunni school of jurisprudence to which most Tunisians adhere. Malikism, Masri assures us, is "marked by great

flexibility and an emphasis on the importance of various cultural practices in shaping religion” (p. 113).

An example of Tunisia’s salutary nonconformity in matters spiritual is what Masri describes as the age-old progressivism of its clerics on women’s rights. He reports that the great Tunisian center for learning, the **[End Page 167]** mosque in the desert city of Kairouan, “became famous for producing a legal code that was centuries ahead of its time in terms of granting women rights in matters of marriage and divorce” (p. 114). Marriage contracts written by the city’s ecclesiasts, he reports, allowed wives to dissolve their marriages if husbands did such things as “taking a second wife or bedding a concubine” (p. 114). The practice seems to have become so widespread that monogamous marriages throughout the Muslim world came to be described as “Kairouanese” ones (p. 114). According to Masri, traditions such as these are the raw materials out of which “liberal secular ideas have been born” and which have “carved out spaces for Islam to play an important role in the private lives of Tunisians while not regulating their political and public spheres” (p. 120).

Much of the work of generating the unique and meritorious Tunisian culture that issued forth in the Arab Spring, Masri tells us, was done by nineteenth-century Tunisian reformists and intellectuals. These men pioneered “an advanced and modern system of education, the emancipation of women, and a moderation of the role of religion in society, governance, and politics” (p. 20). One such figure, whom Masri introduces to us in a superb chapter on Tunisia’s intellectual history, was the Tunisian-Ottoman statesman Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi. An “Islamic modernist” (p. 132), al-Tunisi is credited with numerous modernizing reforms during his tenure as grand vizier from 1873 to 1877, including the founding of Sadiki College, which became a training ground for the country’s Francophone elite, “opening the country to the rest of the world—especially Europe—and equipping students with new knowledge that was necessary for the country’s development” (p. 139). Masri is particularly impressed with al-Tunisi’s

book *Aqwam al-Masalik fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamalik* (*The Surest Path to Knowledge on the State of Kingdoms*), in which he reportedly “proclaimed that Islam did not contradict the values of freedom, justice, and the primacy of law . . . and that Muslims had much to learn from the Europeans . . . that would lead to the betterment of their lives and to proper governance” (pp. 137–38). According to Masri, the reforms and ideas of men like al-Tunisi were to prove “transformative and sturdy enough to set the stage for modern Tunisia as the special case that it is today” (p. 141).

Given all the attention that Masri lavishes on Tunisia’s history and culture, and all the causal weight that he assigns to them in determining the country’s present path, one might be forgiven for thinking that this **[End Page 168]** book comes as a rejoinder to those who attribute Tunisia’s felicitous condition to the ideas and exertions of one man: Habib Bourguiba, the lawyer-turned-politician who steered Tunisia to independence from the French in 1957 and ruled it single-handedly for thirty years afterward. Bourguiba has long been seen as a great modernizer, his country’s version of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or Lee Kuan Yew. In this narrative, it was Bourguiba who educated his country’s citizens, liberated its women, and generally grabbed it by the scruff of its neck and shook it into the modern world. But if, as Masri reports, the Tunisia that Bourguiba inherited was already poised for modernity, a rethinking of the man’s outsized reputation seems in order.

But no. Masri comes not to bury Bourguiba, but to praise him. In Masri’s telling, Bourguiba’s emergence as Tunisia’s great modernizer was both inevitable (given his cultural antecedents) and essential. The maximum leader, Masri tells us, “institutionalized and put into law the liberal reforms . . . that intellectual forces . . . had advocated for almost a century and that rested on a much longer history of moderation and modernity” (pp. 222–23). Thus, Tunisian women may have had the legacy of Kairouan to appeal to in their demands for equality, but it was Bourguiba who freed Tunisian women from the veil (which he called an “odious rag” [p. 239]), who passed a

progressive (for its time) personal-status code that eliminated polygamy and gave women the right to initiate divorce, and who promoted family planning and even granted women access to abortions. According to Masri, Tunisia's "women's revolution . . . was neither a revolution nor led by women, it was a carefully planned and executed decision of Habib Bourguiba" (p. 227).

Similarly, Masri gives Bourguiba much of the credit for Tunisia's comparatively effective educational system: "While other Arab leaders became preoccupied with building their military apparatus, Bourguiba's priority was education" (p. 244). In his early years in office, Masri reports, "Bourguiba spent 10 percent of the national budget on the military, compared to 18 percent on education, with spending on the latter eventually reaching almost 35 percent of the government budget" (p. 208). Bourguiba's emphasis on schooling (and particularly on European-style, Francophone schooling) equipped "generations of Tunisians with the skills of critical and analytical thinking that have been deliberately absent in the rest of the Arab world" (p. xxxi).

Perhaps surprisingly, given Masri's long disquisitions on the inherent moderation and flexibility of Tunisia's distinctive brand of Islam, another area where he gives Bourguiba credit lies in the taming of that creed. Bourguiba, Masri tells us, "ensured that Tunisia averted the path that made religion and political Islam dominant factors in shaping the societies and politics of the rest of the Arab world" (pp. 241–42). He did this by dismantling religious courts, shuttering religious schools, and seizing the resources of religious foundations, "which had the effect of **[End Page 169]** depleting the financial capacities of religious institutions . . . and making them dependent on, and thus controlled by, the state" (p. 235). One of the most dramatic demonstrations of what Masri sees as Bourguiba's heroic subordination of the faith was his attempt to discourage Tunisians from participating in the month-long Muslim fast of Ramadan. "During Ramadan," Bourguiba allegedly claimed, "work stops. At this moment when we are doing the impossible to increase production, how can we resign ourselves to seeing

it slump to a value near zero?” (p. 240). Judging by the behavior of contemporary Tunisians, it appears that Bourguiba failed to get most of them to ignore that particular religious duty, but Masri believes that the *Combattant Suprême* (as the old man liked to be called) was broadly successful in “marginaliz[ing] religion when he thought it could retard the pace of modernizing change” (p. 224).

Thus, starting with Carthage and ending with the Arab Spring, Masri presents Tunisia as unique, and its story as a practically uninterrupted tale of progress, development, and modernization. But there are reasons to be skeptical of this account. For one thing, many of the features Masri claims to be particular to Tunisia could in fact be found elsewhere in the Arab world. For instance, though Masri makes much of Tunisia’s long history of existence as a distinct territorial entity, it is worth noting that nearby Egypt easily surpasses Tunisia in this respect. Similarly, although Masri wants us to believe that Tunisia has been, since time immemorial, as deeply intertwined with Europe as with the Arab world, there are reasons to believe that this is more the fervent wish of Tunisian secularists (who tell him things like “their frame of reference is European and American, not Middle Eastern” [p. 10]) than it is an objective rendering of historical reality. In any case, to the extent that the claim is true, it is no less true of Algeria and Morocco (whose king once famously declared his country to be a tree with roots in Africa and branches in Europe).¹ And yet those places are not considered “Arab anomalies.”

Masri’s insistence on removing Tunisia from the Arab and Muslim worlds leads him to underestimate the extent to which Tunisia has always been affected by broader Arab and North African cultural and intellectual currents. After all, the Maliki school of jurisprudence in which he locates so much good is widespread throughout North Africa, including in Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Sudan. The nineteenth-century reformists whom Masri presents to us as the fathers of Tunisia’s present course did not just come up with their ideas out of nowhere, but built on the work of Arab, and particularly

Egyptian, intellectuals. To give just one example, al-Tunisi was heavily influenced by an Egyptian thinker named Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, whose travelogue of his 1820s visit to France represents one of the earliest and most significant Arab attempts to grapple with the implications of the West's rise.² Masri even describes how, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Tunisian reformers benefited from traffic with Egyptian intellectual giants [End Page 170] including Muhammad Abduh, who argued for modernizing education (p. 148); Qasim Amin, who called for the empowerment of women (p. 160); and Taha Hussein, who argued for greater intellectual engagement with the West (p. 159).

Masri, of course, is not blind to the reformist tradition that existed elsewhere in the Arab world and which did so much to shape the Tunisian variant. But, he tells us, the efforts of Egyptians and other Arabs were “sadly terminated, giving way to a regression . . . [that] will continue to be felt for generations to come” (p. 164). Tunisians, in contrast, were able to “persevere in their reforms and to continue on a generally cumulative and uninterrupted trajectory.” (p. 164). But it is not clear that this Whig version of Tunisian intellectual history is even true. Particularly telling is the fate of a young Tunisian Islamic scholar, Tahar Haddad (1899–1935), who had the temerity to “denounc[e] polygamy and condon[e] abortion when the mother’s life was at risk” (p. 162). Far from being embraced by those who had drunk deep of the alleged flexibility of the Maliki school and of the progressivity of Kairouan, Haddad was “violently criticized” for his beliefs and “spent the rest of his young life depressed and in poor health, having retreated from society” (pp. 162–63). Lest there be any doubt about the finality with which Haddad’s effort was terminated, Masri informs us that “debate in Tunisian society on the emancipation of women was entirely silenced following Haddad’s discrediting and banishment as a heretic” (p. 225). So much for a “cumulative and uninterrupted trajectory.”

Thus, while Masri wants us to believe that Tunisia has always been different, and better, than its Arab brethren, the reality is knottier. Indeed, Masri seems not to realize that his own experiences in the Arab world of the 1960s and 1970s undermine his glossy narrative of Tunisian exceptionalism. In the book's opening pages, he tells us that modern Tunis reminds him of "a city like Amman about three or four decades ago when modernity abounded" (p. xxviii). In Tunis, he reports, "Religion and piety belong almost exclusively to the private sphere, *as used to be the case in much of the Arab world that I grew up in*" (p. xxviii, emphasis added). If these childhood recollections are to be taken seriously, the divergence between Tunisia and the rest of the Arab world has roots not in the distant past, but in the much more recent history of post-World War II state-building.

This brings us back to Bourguiba. Many of the man's reforms are almost certainly deserving of credit for the relatively liberal society, developed economy, and competent state institutions upon which Tunisians have erected their democracy. Although Masri tries to present Bourguiba and his policies as the inevitable result of Tunisian history, the **[End Page 171]** great leader's crooked ideological journey suggests greater contingency than Masri can allow himself to admit. Bourguiba may be remembered as a great emancipator of women and a builder of bridges with the West, but he began as neither of these things. For instance, the scholar Malika Zeghal describes a 1929 editorial (mentioned briefly by Masri) in which Bourguiba ridiculed Tunisian feminists who wanted to remove the veil, declaring it "a custom anchored for centuries in our mores, evolving with them at the same pace," and part of "what distinguishes [Tunisian identity] from all others."³ Likewise, during the struggle for independence from France, Masri himself tells us that the great tamer of religion "used religion as a means to rally the masses to the nationalist cause and to instill a spirit of resistance—invoking the notion of martyrdom and its heavenly rewards in the fight against the colonizer" (p. 175). Readers will be surprised to learn that the man who would go down as the "Arab

Atatürk” even rallied the *Volk* against the “burial of French Muslims in Muslim cemeteries,” arguing that Tunisians who had been naturalized by France were apostates who could not be interred alongside real Muslims (pp. 174–79).

Just as Bourguiba’s beginnings undermine Masri’s claim to an enlightened Tunisian character, so too does his conduct once in power. Masri admits that Bourguiba—in the tradition of Arab dictators everywhere—“showed no interest in a pluralistic approach to governance” (p. 196). This is a man who assassinated his political opponents (among them his former comrade Salah Ben Youssef, killed in 1961); jailed at least one schoolgirl for wearing the *hijab*; and sentenced moderate Islamists to death for the crime of wanting to participate in politics. In 1958, Bourguiba told the *New York Times*, “If it is necessary to establish a dictatorship for a while, I’ll do it.” Clement Henry Moore reports that, at some point in the 1960s, when asked about Tunisia’s system of government, Bourguiba replied, “The system? What system? I am the system.”⁴ He erected one of the Middle East’s most feared domestic security apparatuses, and in 1975 even amended the constitution so that he could reign as president-for-life.⁵ Masri reports all these facts faithfully, but seems blind to how they militate against his assertions of Tunisian distinctiveness.

So wedded is Masri to his narrative of Tunisian difference that he makes some fundamental errors in trying to advance it. For instance, he tells us that Tunisia’s 1959 Constitution was different from Arab constitutions in that “Islam was identified descriptively as the religion of Tunisians but not prescribed as the state religion, thus arguably closing the door on the possibility of introducing Shari’a” (p. 197). This is wrong. Article 1 of the Tunisian constitution (both its 1959 version and the one passed in 2014) reads: “Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic and its type of government is the Republic.”⁶ Moreover, Article 38 of Tunisia’s 1959 Constitution and Article 74 [End Page 172] of its 2014 Constitution both stipulate that the president of the republic must be a Muslim, something that not one of

Egypt's constitutions—including the one written during the Muslim Brotherhood's brief time in government in 2012 and 2013—has ever done. Less significantly, Masri reports that a Tunisian “is the only Arab to have ever been nominated for the Righteous Among Nations honor, reserved for non-Jews who helped save Jews during the Holocaust” (p. 181). In fact, that honor belongs also to an Egyptian physician named Mohamed Helmy, who was not just nominated for the accolade, but—unlike the Tunisian gentleman named by Masri—actually received it.

Although it was perhaps not intended as such, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly* is best read as a political document, a retelling of Tunisian history from the perspective of a particular segment of Tunisian society. It is a perspective that views Tunisia's Arab and Islamic heritages as problems to be overcome, that sees Bourguiba as having stood guard against the backwardness of the faith, and that sees Islamists and Islamic political parties as the primary threat to democracy and progress. But it was not Islam that gave rise to the corrupt and repressive police state against which Tunisians rose up in the waning weeks of 2010. That was erected by card-carrying secularists. And Islamist parties, far from threatening democracy, have so far proven to be better democrats than the secularists with whom Masri appears to sympathize. Indeed, it seems safer to say that it is not Islamists (as problematic as they are) who pose the greatest threat to Arab democracy, but the *fear of Islamists*. After all, Masri himself describes how Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali—the dictator overthrown in 2011—justified his despotism by “warning that Islamists would reverse the gains of secularism” (p. 29).

Of course, it is probably prudent to be skeptical about the motives of any political party, but with respect to Islamists, this book goes further than prudence requires. For instance, instead of giving Ennahda (the leading Tunisian Islamist party) credit for compromising with its opponents and ceding power voluntarily in 2013, Masri talks of “Ennahda's ‘willingness’ to relinquish its power,” the distancing scare quotes suggesting deep mistrust of that group's intentions. Elsewhere, he reports on secularist suspicions

that the party was behind the 2013 murder of a leftist politician, without so much as a word to indicate that those suspicions were entirely unfounded (pp. 65–66). And when he reports that Tunisia’s strong secular parties “ensured that Ennahda could not extend its tenure the way the Muslim Brotherhood tried to do in Egypt,” one cannot shake the feeling [**End Page 173**] that the author’s hostility to Islamists clouds his ability to perceive facts (p. 17). For the record, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did not try to “extend” its tenure—it tried to *serve out* its tenure.

None of the critiques offered here is meant to deny the enormous value of this book. But ultimately that value lies less in its central propositions—that Tunisia is *sui generis*, that the roots of its present democracy lie primarily in its culture, and that other Arab countries can learn nothing from it—and more in its details. For although Masri tries to present the history of Tunisia as a smooth, ever-upward story of progress, there are so many dips and setbacks and discordant facts that it is impossible for the neutral reader not to see contingency, choice, and agency at work.

Things could have gone wrong in Tunisia. For instance, in 2010, after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in the town of Sidi Bouzid, leaders of the national labor union headed to the scene. When told by local union militants that “everything was under control,” they could have packed up and gone home instead of responding, as they did: “We did not come to Sidi Bouzid to put out the fire; we came here to ignite it” (p. 41). Similarly, General Rachid Ammar—the Tunisian army chief of staff credited with supporting the 2011 revolution—could have acquiesced to what Masri describes as “popular support for the army to take charge” after Ben Ali’s departure, instead of heading back to the barracks (p. 49). And just as things could have gone wrong, so may they still. As of this writing in September 2018, the country remains under a “state of emergency” imposed in 2015. Indeed, at a time when the established democracies of the West are by some accounts holding onto democracy with their teeth, grappling with

populist authoritarians and illiberal democrats, it seems surpassingly naïve to talk about any country's fulfillment of some predetermined, democratic destiny.

But that sobering thought also carries with it a sense of possibility. After all, if things can still go wrong in Tunisia, then it is possible that, in the rest of the Arab world—doomed by Masri to more of the backwardness and authoritarianism that have plagued it throughout the last century—things may still go right.

NOTES

1. [\[#f1-text\]](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/699760.stm) Nick Pelham, "Morocco's Quest to Be European," BBC, 3 April 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/699760.stm> [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/699760.stm>].
2. [\[#f2-text\]](#) Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 25–26.
3. [\[#f3-text\]](#) Malika Zeghal, "Veiling and Unveiling Muslim Women: State Coercion, Islam, and the 'Disciplines of the Heart,'" in Abdou Filali-Ansary and Aziz Esmail, eds., *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun* (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 127–49.
4. [\[#f4-text\]](#) Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia Since Independence: The Dynamics of One-Party Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 41.
5. [\[#f5-text\]](#) Nouredine Jebnoun, "Ben Ali's Tunisia: The Authoritarian Path of a Dystopian State," in Nouredine Jebnoun, Mehrdad Kia, and Mimi Kirk, eds., *Modern Middle East Authoritarianism: Roots, Ramifications, and Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 117–18, n. 33.

6. [\[#f6-text\]](#) See the English translation

at <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Tunisia-constitution.pdf>

[\[http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Tunisia-constitution.pdf\]](http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Tunisia-constitution.pdf).

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