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Impressions and thoughts of an incidental tourist in Tunisia in January 2011

By Roni Berger¹

When I planned my two weeks trip to Tunisia earlier this month, I envisioned peaceful, eventless visits to the old palaces, domed mosques and minarets, the country's medinas (old cities surrounded by walls) and Kasbahs (fortresses typically built on the top of hills to serve for defensive purposes), interesting views of Punic, Carthaginian, Roman and Ottoman ruins and mosaics, ancient synagogues, Kairouan the fourth-holiest site in Islam, green Oases and the dunes of the Sahara desert as well as the famous Middle Eastern hospitality and food (being an immigrant from the Middle East, the latter was of special appeal to me). I indeed saw all of these as well as the unanticipated sites of tanks and armed soldiers, policemen and the national guard in the city of Tunis, the bustling capital of this small North African country, also known as one of the Maghreb region, boarding with Libya and Algeria, burning tires in small towns and a nation taking to the street the frustration with a corrupted dictatorship of 23 years.

Tunisia is a progressive westernized Muslim country (98% of the population are Muslims) with a culture that is a mix of secular and Islamic features, new and old. For example, while one hears the muezzin calling for prayer five times a day and alcohol availability is restricted (but not absent), women have equal legal rights and are much more independent and free than in other Muslim countries. Tunisia is the only country in the Arab world where polygamy is forbidden by law, women outnumber men in higher education and a higher percentage of women serve in the Tunisian parliament than in the US congress. Yet, although in many families the woman is the main or sole breadwinner, men are the primary custodians of the car. While the law provides gender equality and full rights for women and the government encourages it, progress is slow because of Tunisia's patriarchal heritage. However, traditional values are gradually changing, especially among the young generation.

Moderation dominates Tunisian norms. Thus, wearing "immodest" clothes (such as shorts, sleeveless shirts and tank tops) is discouraged, so is wearing the Islamic headscarves (hijab), although in the streets, one can see women in modern western outfits side by side with those wearing traditional long djellaba or kaftan; however, the latter is more common in the villages and among older women. While in some Muslim countries (such as Saudi-Arabia), women who are seen in public with a non-relative man may be severely punished and most of those sitting in coffee shops in Tunisia at all hours of the day are men, I often witnessed women freely chatting, shaking hands and exchanging friendly kisses with men. The use of modern contraceptives is high among married Tunisian women and the population growth rate is the lowest in North Africa.

The country's population is young (mean age below 30) and well educated. Literacy rate is 78% for the total population and 94%-97% for the young people age 15-24. The country has relatively large middle class, a two tier (private clinics and public hospitals) fairly well developed health care system, including access to mental health services integrated into primary care, community mental health services especially in the

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capital and along the coastline and availability of essential psychotropic medication (although mental illness still carries a severe social stigma), and no visible poverty such as begging or homelessness of the kind one sees in US cities. However, unemployment, especially of men, soars and college graduates fail to find appropriate jobs, censorship dominates the media and the internet. Attitudes towards France, their previous colonizer, is ambivalent – a mix of cynical mockery (we were not a colony; we were a protectorate because they claimed to protect us) and embracing of the French language and culture. Many of the older generation are more fluent in French and Tunisian, a mix of Berber, French and Arabic components whereas younger people seamlessly switch between languages depending on whom they speak to and how formal the conversation is.

The recent riots erupted several weeks ago after a young man who could not find a job appropriate to his education and worked as a street vendor set himself on fire when the police confiscated his merchandise because he lacked the appropriate permit. During my visit, word about protests spread online and town after town joined originally with a significant presence of high school and higher education students, eventually engulfing all social strata with a considerable participation by women. Sporadic gunfire, demonstrations and mounting unrest quickly escalated leaving many killed and wounded, although numbers were hard to come by because of major discrepancies among reports from the local government, foreign media, human rights groups and amateur clips posted on social networks. It was hard to miss the tension. Several times during the trip our group of 16 Americans was stopped and had to be escorted by armed security forces, take back dirt roads and stay confined in a resort because of the violence in the streets. On our last day, just before we were evacuated, we could see from our hotel on Boulevard Bourguiba (named after the first and only former president of the country after its independence from the French colonialism in 1956) tanks, snipers on the adjacent rooftop of the Interior Ministry and a crowd of angry demonstrators filling the wide Champs-Elise-like elegant avenue.

From conversations I had in Tunisia during my two weeks there, this was a revolution waiting to happen. People openly criticized the president, his corrupted wife and her siblings, who milked the country's economy while the average Tunisian family struggled to make ends meet and have become increasingly frustrated and angry. Our leader, Aicha (named after prophet Muhammad's most beloved wife) a beautiful, bright, confident and outspoken woman who hosted us in her home (where we enjoyed the tasty traditional food that her mother cooked and the delightful company of her shy son and "fiery "daughter), willingly shared with us information about the "special network revolution" and the important role women play in it as well as in many aspects of Tunisian politics, culture and economy. At the time that these comments are written, the struggle to get rid of all those connected to the older regime is going on and the world is waiting to see how Tunisians will fare as well as the impact of the current state of affairs on neighboring and other Muslim countries.