

# The Tunisian Experiment Succeeds

Book Review by Brenda Walker

With so many dysfunctional and cruelly backward societies mired in the primitive Islam of the 7th century, is it even possible that a Muslim nation can be genuinely modern in the western sense of individual rights and egalitarian values?

Yes, according to journalist and international observer Georgie Anne Geyer, who believes that Tunisia indeed qualifies as a uniquely advanced Arab nation whose success should provide a model for others. Her book, *Tunisia: A Journey through a Country that Works*, makes an upbeat and convincing argument that we should pay attention to what this small country has accomplished.

The book is a tourist-eye road trip through political and economic development. Ms Geyer takes the reader along as she visits with Tunisian government officials and other notables to discuss their humane and constructive policies. (Along the way, there is sightseeing, cafe lounging and scenic descriptions the tourist board must love.) The ideas expressed by development experts are so commonsensical that it's hard to remember they are voiced in a nation where Islam is the principle religion.

The statistics of progress are remarkable: 75 percent of Tunisians are ranked as being middle class, and 80 percent own their own homes. Poverty is a mere

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four percent. Forty percent of women hold jobs and polygamy is illegal.

History plays an interesting part in the story. The pre-Islamic past of Carthage, Rome and Christianity is embraced rather than rejected in the Muslim Correctness one see in most Arab nations.

But it is Tunisia's recent history which is crucial to its success, starting with its independence from France in 1957.

Like Turkey, Tunisia had a visionary leader to blaze the path into modernity: Turkey had its Attaturk and Tunisia had Habib Bourgiba pursuing a western-flavored view of progress, while including Tunisian tradition in the mix. Of course, the road to culture-friendly development was no cakewalk, and Geyer emphasizes Bourgiba's acumen in judging the political weather and knowing when to push forward or pull back. A pragmatic and gradual approach has

been successful, unlike the trendier "isms" that have come and gone, like Marxism, pan-Arabism and Baathism.

As Foreign Minister Habib Ben Yahia remarked, "We are in a process of maturation in Tunisia. There cannot be instant democracy or instant human rights. Democracy is not instant coffee. We are pragmatic, rational, and we are trying to reflect and find solutions. We are not doctrinaire. When we see failures or difficulties that cannot be solved, we think harder."

There was no magic formula required, just sensible remedies to the Arab-Muslim malaise: education, women's emancipation and birth control. Education means the western sort for both boys and girls, where learning extends beyond the text of the Koran, unlike the madrassas which substitute for schools in some Islamic countries. The advantage to liberating the talents of women from Islamic chains is obvious, particularly in a small country with no oil wells, where developing the

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Journey through  
a Country that  
Works**

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abilities of all people must be at the heart of bootstrapping up.

And Tunisia's priority on family planning is becoming evident as a great wisdom: of it, the Foreign Minister said, "First of all, we started with birth control. It was written into our first plans. We have nine million people today – we can handle that." (Imagine American leadership saying in 1970, "We have 200 million people – that's a number we should maintain.")

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, overpopulation pressures are starting to show in unpleasant ways. Even rich Arab states like Saudi Arabia are experiencing difficult growing pains now, where the economic wealth per person has dropped precipitously as the population exploded from 4.8 million in 1960 to more than 22 million today. Tunisia's next-door neighbor Algeria had about four million people in 1957, roughly the same as Tunisia's number in that year of its independence from France. Algeria now has more than 30 million residents and is

plagued by violent political strife.

Tunisia has its detractors. Former colonial ruler France criticizes it for the one-party system. To be sure, most single-party states are individual-squashing autocracies. But occasionally a country will get lucky with a philosopher-king, or some variation thereof, who will do what is needed for people-centered progress to occur.

The most definitive evidence shows that the Tunisian experiment has succeeded. In the 1980s, Tunisian immigrants were swamping Europe. By 1999, there was hardly any emigration and many former émigrés had returned home.

Can the lessons of this unusual society be transplanted? A better question is whether the rest of the Arab world is ready for non-Islamic, pragmatic remedies. Whatever the case on that front, Ms. Geyer's book illuminates sensible strategies for third-world development, written in an engaging style. •

### But What Of U.S. Borders?

Washington, D.C. (2/1/05) – This week, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) deployed another team of CBP officers and Border Patrol agents to Iraq and the surrounding region in an effort to help secure Iraq's borders. The CBP team, deployed prior to the Iraqi national elections, will support current border security efforts. The support and additional training of Iraqi border police will continue beyond the elections. The focus is to keep saboteurs, terrorists and armaments from crossing into or out of Iraq.

"U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers and Border Patrol agents are fighting the war on terror, and we've taken it to the borders of Iraq. Our people are on a vital mission to train Iraqis to protect their own borders and build Iraqi

institutions that will safeguard the new freedoms and democratic principles being established there. There is no more important mission," said Commissioner Bonner.

This latest effort by CBP is an enhancement to the already ongoing commitment to develop and help institutionalize Iraq's border security strategy. The CBP team began training Iraqis at the Jordanian International Police Training Center (JIPTC) in Amman, Jordan in August 2004. Since that time, over 2100 Iraqi border control officers have been trained.

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