

Praising The Tunisian Exception Without Understanding What Explains It

[Here](#) is a comment on the apparent ability of Tunisian democracy to work. There are so many like it. Their authors feel no need to explain why Tunisia might be an exception to the Arab-Spring rule, where the overthrow of a regime leads either to chaos (Libya, Syria, Yemen) or, after a brief experience with the Muslim Brotherhood, despotism, albeit enlightened and highly desirable despotism (Egypt).

There is no mention of Habib Bourguiba, of the Destour Party, of Bourguiba's determined suspicion of Islam, of the role played in his formation by the years he spent in France. There is no mention of the French Connection that has so benefitted the more advanced class of Tunisians, those who read the French-language press of both France and Tunisia, listen to French television, are able to travel back and forth from France, have their children study in France.

Whatever has made Tunisia an exception is explained by the influence – the mission civilisatrice – of France. Why is that so difficult for commentators to recognize, understand, and note? Is it because it seems condescending? Are we to pretend that those Muslims who study in Europe can, if their ties to Islam are as a consequence diminished, or have the access that a knowledge of French can provide, France still being a country that, unlike the United Kingdom, is still, in what most matters – I think the famous phrase flatteringly fits – *“sûr de lui-même et dominateur.”*