

Chapter IV The Road to the Construction of the Modern State of Tunisia

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1. Pre-modern Context

In 1574, following decades of military struggle against the Spanish for the control of Ifrīqiyya (present day Tunis or Tunisia), the Ottoman Turks finally established their rule over the country, which, subsequently came to be referred to as *iyālat Tūnis* or *al-iyāla al-Tūnisiyya* (the regency of Tunis). Over the next 130 years, “the Turkish domination was exclusively military and fiscal”¹ in nature. The affairs of the regency were managed by a pasha (*bāshā*), who was appointed by *al-bāb al-‘ālī* (Ottoman Caliphate) to serve for a determined period of time. In managing the affairs of the regency, the pasha was assisted by *al-dīwān*, a military council composed of janissaries. In 1591, *al-dīwān* took control of the regency and established a so-called military democracy whereby about three hundred deys (*dāys*; heads of the janissary factions) managed the affairs of the regency in a collegial fashion. Seven years passed before the dey ‘Uthmān brought down the military democracy and governed the regency in an absolute manner.

The regency was ruled by a dey until the middle of the ensuing century, when his authority was challenged by the next-in-rank, bey (*bāy*). Under his command were *al-maḥalla* (a military contingent that left Tunis once a year to tour the country and collect taxes), the *zuwāra* (an infantry of native Berbers that toured the country with *al-maḥalla* to collect taxes), and *al-qabā’il al-makhzaniyya* (a regiment composed of local Arab tribes used to assist *al-maḥalla* with tax collection); the bey enjoyed a certain familiarity with the country and its inhabitants.

In 1705, the bey al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, a *kulughlī*,² established himself as the ruler of the regency of Tunis. He became the first regent to associate himself with the land he ruled, because in addition to being born in Tunis, his mother was a native of the northwestern region. Al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī founded the dynasty that would reign until July 1957 when the Republic of Tunisia was proclaimed.

During the reign of al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī’s descendant, the bey Ḥammūda Pasha

¹ Mahmoud Bouali, *Introduction à l’histoire constitutionnelle de la Tunisie* (Tunis: En-Najah, n.d.), vol. 1:205.

² In the case of Tunisia, the term designated Ottoman ruling elite born in Tunis from a Tunisian mother.

(Bāshā) (1782–1814), who was also a *kulughlī*, the regency was able to increase its independence from *al-bāb al-‘ālī* and attain a satisfactory level of material prosperity. Indeed, with the aim of challenging a decree issued by the Ottoman caliph that instituted ‘Alī Burghul as governor of the regency of Tripoli, Ḥammūda Pasha dispatched an army to reinstate the former ruler ‘Alī Karamanlī (al-Qaramānlī).³ The bey also refused to allow the dey of Algeria to continue to interfere in the affairs of the regency and refused to resume tribute payments. Further, in 1807, the bey’s armies repelled an Algerian invasion that had aimed to intimidate him.

As far as the economic state of the regency was concerned, the Napoleonic Wars contributed to an increase in the prices of agricultural produce, which encouraged farmers to increase their output, while a flourish of piracy activities also boosted the external revenue of the regency.

After Europe returned to a state of serenity, the benefits resulting from the two factors mentioned above vanished, although they had helped to boost the regency’s proceeds. In 1816, during the visit of Lord Exmouth, the ruler of the regency was forced to accept the treaties of Vienna, which proscribed piracy, among other things.⁴

The already degrading economic conditions would soon worsen. Four consecutive years of drought (1815–18) followed by two years of plague (1818–19) devastated the regency’s economy. In the years that followed, the control of Tunisia’s external trade fell into the hands of foreign merchants,⁵ and unequal treaties became the basis of the regency’s relations with European states.

2. The Reign of the Bey Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā and the First Attempts at Modernization and Reform (1837–1855)

After France invaded Algeria (1830), and the Ottomans reinstated their direct control over the regency of Tripoli (1835), the bey Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā (1806–55), a fervent admirer of Europe’s military preeminence, came to the conclusion that modernization according to the European model was the only way for *al-iyāla al-*

³ Ali Mahjoubi (‘Alī al-Maḥjūbī), *Al-Nahḍa al-Ḥadītha fī al-Qarn al-Tāsi‘ ‘Ashar: li-mādhā Fashalat bi-Miṣr wa-Tūnis wa-Najaḥat bi-l-Yābān* (Modern awakening of the 19th century) (Tunis: Cérés Editions, 1999), 90.

⁴ Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī, *Aqwam al-Masālik fī Ma‘rifat Aḥwāl al-Mamālik* (The surest path to knowledge concerning the condition of countries), intro. and ed. al-Munṣif al-Shannūfī (Tunis: al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1998), 28. This book was first published 1867 by Maṭba‘at al-Dawla.

⁵ For example, foreign merchants controlled at least 92 percent of the olive oil trade in 1820–22. For more on the topic, see Mahjoubi, *Al-Nahḍa al-Ḥadītha fī al-Qarn al-Tāsi‘ ‘Ashar*, 80.

Tūnisiyya to avoid the fate of her neighbors, Algeria and Tripoli.⁶

In 1840, Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā inaugurated Tunisia's first modern educational institution, al-Madrassa al-Ḥarbiyya (College of War). The college was directed by an Italian army general and employed a number of Tunisian, French, and Italian instructors to teach military modules, calculus, engineering, topography, religion, history, Arabic, and foreign languages. While the college's scientific curriculum was taught in French, the remaining modules were taught in Arabic. Al-Madrassa al-Ḥarbiyya was the first institution in Tunisia to familiarize its students with "Europe's sciences, ways, and thought; consequently with the modern European awakening."⁷ Fervent supporters of reform graduated from al-Madrassa al-Ḥarbiyya, such as General Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn (1828–86), the key supporter of the modernization program of Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī (1822–90).

In addition, Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā decided to reorganize the religious educational institution, al-Zaytūna, in order to adapt it to the changing times and the needs of the emerging state and contemporary society. On 1 November 1842, he issued *al-mu'allaqa* (literally), which was posted at the entrance to the Zaytūna Mosque, announcing the substance of the agenda for the restructuring of the religious institution and its educational wings. The bey personally monitored the progress of al-Zaytūna's implementation of the contents of *al-mu'allaqa*. He often visited the religious institution and attended lectures without prior notice.⁸ Although *al-mu'allaqa* encouraged resorting to *ijtihād* (exercise of independent judgment), it focused primarily on administrative reorganization and failed to suggest amending the curriculum or determining the number of teaching hours.⁹ In conclusion, as far as the issue of the promotion of scientific knowledge was concerned, the reforms served little purpose.¹⁰

As for industrialization, the bey ordered the construction of several modern mechanized manufacturing units and promoted mining excavation. In order to support Tunisia's economy and its industrialization, the bey Aḥmad founded a locally owned development bank—the first of its kind in the Arab-Islamic world.¹¹ The Ottomans and the Egyptians founded their development banks in 1863 and 1856,

⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ Mahmoud Abdel Moula, "L'Université zaytounienne et la société tunisienne" (PhD diss., Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1971), 81.

⁹ Al-Ṭāhir al-Ḥaddād, "Al-Nahḍa al-Āmma kayfa Tansha' wa-kayfa Takūn" (Popular awakening: Start and development), in *Al-A'māl al-Kāmila* (The complete works), comp. and ed. Wizārat al-Thaqāfa (Tunis: al-Dār al-'Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1999), vol. 1:119. The article was first published in *Al-Umma*, 18 May 1922.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mahjoubi, *Al-Nahḍa al-Ḥadītha fī al-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Ashar*, 87.

¹² Ibid.

respectively.¹² The bank's main tasks were to issue Tunisian currency and to finance the industrial development of the country. In 1852, the director of the bank fled to France with the contents of its coffers.

In addition to the abovementioned reforms, one of the most widely praised and radical social reforms was the prohibition of slavery ordered by Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā on 26 January 1846; slavery was outlawed despite opposition from the ruling class and 'ulama' (scholars of Islamic theology).¹³

3. The Reforms of Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī during the Reign of the Bey Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (1859–1882)

Following the death of Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā, *al-iyāla al-Tūnisiyya* was governed by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn (1811–59) for just under five years. During his short reign (1855–59), the bey Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn ordered the creation of a commission to draft the constitution (1857), which would make *al-iyāla al-Tūnisiyya* a constitutional monarchy. He appointed General Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī as head of the commission. In 1858, the bey Muḥammad decreed the establishment of al-Majlis al-Baladī (Communal Assembly) of the city of Tunis, which was led by General Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn.

Originally from the Caucasian region, Khayr al-Dīn was kidnapped and sold to an Ottoman Turk aristocrat who subsequently relinquished him to a negotiator of the Tunisian bey Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā. Khayr al-Dīn grew up in the immediate environment of the bey's family and married the daughter of the long-serving *wazīr akbar* (prime minister) Muṣṭafā Khaznadār (1817–78).¹⁴ After spending four years in France (1853–57) representing the interests of the bey's government, he was appointed minister of the navy, during which time he participated in drafting the Tunisian constitution, which was proclaimed in 1861. That same year, he became the first president of the newly created al-Majlis al-Akbar li-l-Mamlaka al-Tūnisiyya (Parliament of the Kingdom of Tunisia).

As Khayr al-Dīn was knowledgeable about Europe's modern history and was a fervent admirer of its accomplishments, he continuously advocated political, economic, and social reforms based on Islamic principles. These, he insisted, were not subject to proscription, as they best served Muslims in particular and humanity in general. "We have to choose [among Europeans' accomplishments] what fits us best, based on, and conforming to the texts of our shari'a."¹⁵

During his term as head of al-Majlis al-Akbar, Khayr al-Dīn granted the insti-

¹³ Ibid., 90.

¹⁴ Khaznadār's premiership lasted from 1837 to 1873.

¹⁵ Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī, *Aqḥam al-Masālik fī Ma'rifat Aḥwāl al-Mamālik*, 85.

tution greater authority to control the expenses of the royal family, to supervise the government, and to promote ministerial accountability. However, disappointed by the ruling elite's lack of political will to reform the country, he retired from public life in 1863.

When he withdrew from public office, Khayr al-Dīn was called upon to lead several official missions abroad and he wrote his eminent *Aqwam al-Masālik fī Ma'rifat al-Ḥwāl al-Mamālik* (The surest path, 1867),¹⁶ in which he advocated the use of rationalization in the management of the affairs of the state and the relinquishment of inadequate and inept customs. In 1870, when the regency was no longer capable of servicing its debts, the European powers intervened and forced the bey to form an international financial commission whose mission was to put the country's finances in order to allow it to fulfill its external financial obligation. Khayr al-Dīn was called upon to head the commission, which he did until 1873 when he was appointed *wazīr akbar*, a position he held until 1877. Following his political demise, in 1877, he left for Istanbul, where he became minister of justice. Shortly thereafter, on 4 December 1878, La Porte (the Ottoman Caliphate) appointed him *wazīr akbar* of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷

During his career, Khayr al-Dīn and his like-minded associates, especially General Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn, never ceased to advocate the country's reform, which he always regarded as an inseparable constituency of the Ottoman administration. Unlike the bey Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā, an admirer of Europe's impressive material progress and one who attempted to import and superficially reproduce some material elements of its modernization, Khayr al-Dīn had a reasonably more comprehensive agenda. The great differences that existed between the content of their modernization agendas may have been a result of the fact that the beys were not known for being keen on knowledge or scholarship,¹⁸ which could be considered as one of the reasons why pre-colonial Tunisia did not produce enlightened despots.

Before he retired for the first time from public office, Khayr al-Dīn was one of the utmost supporters of the promulgation of *'ahd al-amān* (the bey's decree promising reforms, 1857) and the constitution (1861), and was one of the founders of *Al-Rā'id al-Tūnisī* (The Tunisian forerunner [official gazette]). During his voluntary retreat in 1863, he reflected on the failed attempts to reform the country and the reasons for this failure. He wrote his reflections and what he considered to be their remedies in *Aqwam al-Masālik fī Ma'rifat al-Ḥwāl al-Mamālik*.

In *Aqwam al-Masālik*, he pointed to some of the reasons that he thought stood firmly against the accomplishment of reforms in the territory of the Kingdom of

¹⁶ See note 4.

¹⁷ Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī, *Khérédine: homme d'État*, comp. and intro. Mohamed-Salah Mzali (Muḥammad al-Ṣāliḥ Mazālī) and Jean Pignon (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l'édition, 1971), 54.

¹⁸ Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī, *Aqwam al-Masālik fī Ma'rifat al-Ḥwāl al-Mamālik*, 204–6.

Tunisia.¹⁹ He concluded that in order for Tunisia to become apt to achieve a satisfactory level of reform and adapt to modern times, there should be reforms at the political, economic, and social levels.²⁰ At the political level, he insisted that the ruler should be a man of knowledge and that he should be just and accountable, consulting with those who know best.²¹ In addition, the citizens of the kingdom should enjoy freedom of expression and intervention in the state of affairs of the kingdom.²² At the economic level, the citizens should enjoy freedom to administer their properties, while the government should impose reasonable taxation, and encourage the formation of incorporation and fair trade.²³ At the social level, he called for the vulgarization of schooling and for the equal treatment of all citizens before the law, regardless of race or religion.

In 1873, following his appointment as *wazīr akbar*, Khayr al-Dīn attempted to implement his reform agenda. *Al-wazīr al-akbar* deemed that “redressing the country requires the restoration of certain moral principles, a civic mentality, a sense of national solidarity, attachment to justice, loyalty, and devotion to public affairs.”²⁴ On this basis, he proceeded with the following: (a) the reorganization and *tunisification* of the government and central and local administrations based on European models, and of the elimination of corrupt elements and recall of those who were previously disgraced; (b) the attempt to balance the budget of the Kingdom of Tunisia and pay off its external debts; (c) the reform of the judiciary based on a draft proposal submitted by a commission composed by reformist ‘ulama’; (d) the popularization of education through the establishment of modern and free-of-charge educational institutions (such as al-Şādiqiyya); (e) the promotion of traditional agriculture and the urban economy; and (f) the attempt to renegotiate the unequal commercial treaties signed with European powers and the status of their nationals residing in the Kingdom of Tunisia.²⁵

One of Khayr al-Dīn’s main contributions was his interest in encouraging Tunisians to care for their native land and his interest in giving rise to local and widespread public opinion. In attempting to do this, he took a special interest in promoting journalism and literature.²⁶

Al-wazīr al-akbar’s agenda and its steady, successful implementation began to worry the bey and his entourage, whose powers were becoming increasingly

¹⁹ Ibid., 89–102.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 90–92.

²² Ibid., 99–101.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mongi Smida, *Khereddine: Ministre réformateur* (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l’édition, 1970), 105.

²⁵ For more on the subject, refer to Smida, *Khereddine*, 105–356.

²⁶ Ibid., 37–38.

restricted.²⁷ His efforts aroused suspicion among the European powers that had yet to determine their nominee for the military occupation of Tunisia; they were awaiting its socioeconomic collapse in order to justify their *enlightening agenda*, i.e., formal occupation. “Extremely independent, extremely patriotic, the Tunisian minister was disturbing.”²⁸ On 23 July 1877, following a disagreement with the bey, Khayr al-Dīn’s resignation was tendered and accepted.

Even though Khayr al-Dīn later became a point of reference and symbol for the subsequent reformist and nationalist movements, there remain unanswered questions about his role in the failure of the reforms and the real intentions behind his modernization agenda.

Shall one recall that the reformist tendency, whose leader was Khayr al-Dīn, was essentially bourgeois and had no popular basis. The constituents of the reformist faction belonged to the city of Tunis’ privileged milieu (prominent magistrates and high officials). In addition, the movement was limited to the capital [Tunis], including a restrained circle of intellectuals of the *balḍī* class [native of Tunis], and prominent individuals, whose families were at the service of the beys since generations. It is important to notice that the leaders of the reformist movement did not only try to include the people but also failed to associate the rural bourgeoisie and the notables of the tribes.²⁹

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²⁷ Sadok Zmerli, *Les précurseurs* (Tunis: Éditions Bouslama, n.d.), 61.

²⁸ Smida, *Khereddine*, 364.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 384–85.

Al-Ṭāhir al-Ḥaddād. “Al-Nahḍa al-‘Āmma kayfa Tansha’ wa-kayfa Takūn” (Popular awakening: Start and development). In *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila* (The complete works), compiled and edited by Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, vol. 1: number of pages. Tunis: al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1999. First published in *Al-Umma*, 18 May 1922.

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