

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with President Ben Ali of Tunisia (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs
Shuckran Kamal, Interpreter

President Ben Ali
Abdelaziz Hamzaoui, Tunisian Ambassador
to the U.S.
Afif Garbouj, Interpreter

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: May 15, 1990, 10:30 - 11:00 a.m. EST
The Oval Office

The President: With your permission, let's start in here briefly, if you have any subjects you would like to discuss in private. (U)

President Ben Ali: I would like to express my pleasure at being here and continuing our talks, especially since the United States enjoys such prestige and since our two countries agree on democracy, human rights, and economic progress. We can discuss other issues in our general meeting, but if you have any questions on our internal situation? (U)

The President: We have great respect for the way you have been moving. We are concerned about stability in Algeria. It is so important that Tunisia continue its role of a stable element in the region. We have no sense of instability in Tunisia, but stability in the Maghreb as a whole is of concern to us and is very important. We continue to view Qadhafi as a destabilizing force, but I would like to hear your views on him. (U)

President Ben Ali: I would like to discuss religious extremists in Tunisia and Algeria. (U)

The President: Good. (U)

President Ben Ali: We are watching the religious extremists very carefully in Tunisia. We are giving them a little freedom to see how they behave. There is no pluralism in Islam. They have the "word." The extremists lie and double talk. We let them out of prison, form student unions, publish a newspaper, et cetera. We want them to speak up so people can see and hear what they are. I do not think they are a threat. (S)

The President: Is one worse than another? (U)

President Ben Ali: With each he has his style. He tells Qadhafi that Tunisia's leadership are agents of the United States. Then he comes here and says something different. He doubletalks. He fits his talk to his audience. In Algeria, things have advanced further and we are worried. Their religious party is legal. They go out from mosques to demonstrate and there is violence. Ninety percent of the women wear veils out of fear. They believe they can achieve power. (S)

The President: Does Benjedid believe that? (S)

President Ben Ali: He doesn't think so. We have spoken together about it. I fear negative developments in Algeria. (S)

The President: That would be terrible. Where does Qadhafi stand? We haven't changed our view of him. (S)

President Ben Ali: Qadhafi is Qadhafi. He has not changed. Revolutionary centers are his cure for everything. (S)

The President: How about Morocco? (U)

President Ben Ali: We are a little apprehensive. We believe that maybe the situation in Morocco is a bit tense and the religious elements are beginning to move. The extremists use human rights as a justification for their actions. Our students are protesting for human rights, but I would like to talk to them because they do not understand -- they do not know the facts. (S)

The President: Is the (Western) Sahara still a mess? (U)

President Ben Ali: The referendum won't lead to a solution. The King of Morocco won't give up any territory and so long as Algeria supports the Polisario, there will not be any end to the conflict. (S)

The President: I thought that King Hassan and the Polisario had gotten together. (U)

President Ben Ali: They had some talks but not that much came of it. (S)

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The President: We would like to help but it is difficult to see how the United States could play a role. (Ø)

President Ben Ali: Things are worse in Algeria than in Morocco. Economic conditions are the primary cause. When a Muslim is hungry he turns to God. (Ø)

At 11:00 a.m., the private meeting adjourned to the Cabinet Room.
(U)

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