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Zenga Zenga, Tente Tente:

Can Tunisian Humanitarian Efforts Save and Preserve the Ideals of the Revolution?

Ava Hess

May 13, 2011

“We *are* a part of the revolution, even if we are five or six hundred kilometers from Tunis, ” though the muggy tent I am sitting in feels like it could be much further than several hundred kilometers from the country’s capital or indeed from any city of today’s world. In fact, my mind wanders in a heat haze, it feels like it could even be on a different planet... “We are a part of it,” he repeats. Outside, I can hear the determined desert winds raise sand high up and into the clouds, covering the landscape in a filmy, beige dust.

I am at the Tunisian Red Crescent camps, located in a no-man’s land between the nearest town of Ben Gardane and, in the other direction, Ras Ajdir, the border crossing between southern Tunisia and northwestern Libya, where approximately 20,000 migrants and refugees have been housed in temporary camps since February¹. That was over two months ago, when the situation in Libya still maintained its hopeful title, the ‘Libyan Revolution,’ a name inspired by the successful uprisings of the nation’s neighbors on either side, Tunisia and Egypt. Today, May 2, I am visiting the refugee camps at Ras Ajdir, when the media’s name for what is happening on the other side of the border has degenerated to the ‘Libyan Crisis’ or even the ‘Libyan Civil War.’ Moreover, I have come on the third day of a desert sandstorm that will, in the upcoming week, destroy half of the refugee tents set up by the Tunisian delegation of the Red Crescent, or the Croissant Rouge Tunisien (CRT).

¹ Le Croissant Rouge Tunisien. <http://www.tunisianredcrescent.org/fr/index.php>

The UN Refugee Agency. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/teaxis/vtx/home>.

Today, there is no sun shining in the areas around Ras Ajdir, but only a vague, grayish light that emanates from somewhere deep within the hazy atmosphere. Opaquely, the light filters through a mixture of gritty clouds and sandy air, appearing somewhat yellow or perhaps even golden. The wide landscape acts as an open canvas for the wind, who spreads sand onto every inch of its painting, erasing the sense of separation between the ground and the sky, blending them into one.

The wind has been just as aggressive all day, and the weather just as surreal, such that the hours too blend together and time seems like a foreign concept. I arrived at the camps in the morning with Médecins Sans Frontières, in their car decorated with MSF logos and stickers of a machine-gun icon crossed out in a red circle. Waved through two military checkpoints, the car made its way to the camp, where quickly fled the harsh wind for the mental health clinic tent set up by MSF. There, the MSF coordinators found one of the junior employees, a young Tunisian who spoke only French and Arabic, to escort me and my fellow student, Elizabeth, through the camps and to assist us in our interviews.

We spent the day making our way through what felt at first like a ghost town of dusty, gray tents. The sandy wind was severe and painful, meaning that very few people wanted to brave the outdoors except during meal hours, when they head for the center of camp to wait in food lines. The few people we did see in those early hours at the camp were walking around with scarves wrapped around their heads and often over their faces, like colorful shields. If the sensation of sand burning my eyes had not been so visceral, so vivid, I would have mistaken myself for walking in a dream, among miles of dusty

tents flapping in the wind, otherworldly weather, and the occasional faceless walking man.

Our only relief from the relentless wind came with invitations into various tents. Whenever we would see someone ducking in between tents or walking in the distance, our MSF employee escort would scramble after him or her, explaining that he was with two American students conducting research on the condition of the refugee camps and he would ask them if they would mind allowing us to ask a few questions. In general, the responses were positive, much to our happiness, if only even to allow us a moment's worth of protection from the weather. Inside every tent, my eyes gratefully enjoyed respite not only from the sand and wind but also from the monotonous sights and hues of the outside world; growing tired of the same gray and beige, the repetitive maze of identical tents, lined one after the other in perfect rows, my hungry eyes enthusiastically welcomed the diversity of color in every tent. Because, while every tent looked the same from outside and were so crowded next to each other, they each contained inside what felt like isolated, separate microcosms – a Somali family with a fifteen day old baby in one, a group of young Sudanese migrant workers playing dominoes in another, an Islamic Relief administrative tent next to a tent of five older Eritrean women wrapped in flowery fabric, a tent with a television connected to a small satellite dish outside, and every now and then, a tent that is empty but for the sound of the wind rippling its sides.

Among all the refugees and volunteers we spoke to, few if any refrained from complaining about the weather. From the refugees, mostly third country nationals originally from countries to which they cannot return, most often due to political turmoil (i.e. Somalia, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, parts of Sudan), we heard a vast range of grievances.

For one, the food is too spicy here, for another, the water tastes foul. The rice is not fully cooked, the baby needs milk, there are not enough female sanitary napkins. Regardless of whether the refugees had been at the camp for only a couple days or up to two and a half months, each and every one complained about being there too long. One hysteric man led us around the camp yelling, “Ween Ban Ki-Moon!? Ween al-Bashir (“Where’s Ban Ki-Moon!? Where’s al-Bashir”) looking up at the sky, begging for an airplane to take him and his family back to his country, Sudan. Medical attention and resources are limited, there is not enough security at night, tents are broken, there are problems, sometime violence, between various nationalities. The list continues on and on. But, the most common complaint was by far regarding the weather. Everyone would look up or wave a hand towards the sky; a mother complained about her children’s lungs hurting from breathing in all this dust and sand and a young migrant worker worried that having to stay inside all day was forcing people to madness, to do ‘bad, crazy things,’ he said, like trying to return to Libya or risking one’s life on a rickety boat headed for Italy.

After speaking with so many refugees, I also wanted to hear the perspectives of some of the volunteers, both from international organizations like MSF but also from national organizations, like the Croissant Rouge Tunisien (CRT). In Tunis, Elizabeth and I had been given the name of the coordinator of the CRT operation at Ras Ajdir, a man named Dr. Ben Miled. We brought up his name all day, asking this person and that, but neither the MSF employees and volunteers nor any of the refugees we spoke to seemed to know who he was. After what felt like a wild goose chase through wind and sand, in pursuit of a mere name, we stumbled into a bigger tent on the outskirts of the camp. Through the graininess of the air, we could barely make out, waving at the top of the tent, a white flag – with a red crescent.

Inside, a group of about five young men, all in their twenties, hung around sitting on disorderly piles of various ‘non food items’ – Kotex, anti-bacterial wipes, soap, etc. They were all wearing khaki Croissant Rouge vests, walkie-talkies, and kuffiyehs wrapped around their heads. They seemed surprised to see us walk into the tent, but when we asked if they knew Dr. Ben Miled, they were excited, “oh, Hafedh? Of course!” One of them, named Marwan, made several calls on his walkie-talkie and then turned to us, “Want to come see our camp, the Croissant Rouge camp? Hafedh’s there too.” We all posed for a picture together and then we were off, at last, to meet the powerful mind behind the operation – the Wizard of this strange, almost apocalyptic version of Oz.

We climbed into cars, drove out of the refugee camps and a short distance on the highway to a smaller, fenced-in set of tents. On the way, the boys explained that the Croissant Rouge Tunisien constitutes the only organization whose volunteers spend nights as well as days at Ras Ajdir, instead of driving a minimum of half an hour to and from the nearest town every morning and evening. This small camp of about thirty tents, including administrative and meeting spaces, a dining hall, showers and lodgings, is highly secured, with a high fence surrounding the camp and guards posted at the only entrance.

Comparatively speaking, the CRT camp enjoys many more comforts as it is spacious and less crowded than the refugee camps, but the fine-grained sand was as severe and relentless creeping into every crevice and wrinkle of my face, worming its way into my eyes, ears and nose. After convincing the security guards that we were students and not journalists, we were led to one of the smaller administrative tents, the

last tent we would duck into today to avoid the harsh climate. This is how I found myself in the hot, muggy tent, speaking with Dr. Ben Miled.

Inside, there are plastic tables set up with computers and wires heading in every direction, white boards with notes and pictures of the volunteers tacked to them, and, even here, the pervasive sand has made its way to carpet the tent's floor. Dr. Ben Miled is a young man with a kind face, glasses and a long black fabric tied like a Bedouin turban around his head. When he first sees us, he asks, with a twinkle in his eyes, "Enjoying the sandstorm today?"

Elizabeth and I waste no time asking him questions, and plunge right into an interview. My mind, though, is somewhat distracted, overwhelmed by the experience of feeling dropped into the middle of an alternate reality – the planet of Ras Ajdir. My brain has barely had the time to register what my eyes have seen around me today, but walking around Tunis only yesterday feels like ages ago. In fact, I feel as though I am facing an impossible task, the challenge to make sense of two seemingly incongruous, paradoxical experiences: my experience studying abroad in post-revolutionary Tunis, the epicenter of the nation's political scene, and the dream-like maze of tents at Ras Ajdir. My inability to find some relationship, linkage, between the two experiences, the two places, leads me to assume that to be in one place, experiencing one of these two seemingly incompatible realities, necessarily means a sacrifice of the other.

Wrapped up and muddled in my own thoughts, I struggle to vocalize my question coherently. I hear Dr. Ben Miled explain, "right now, we have about one hundred and thirty volunteers staying here every night, although it varies night by night, and most of them, I would say about 90% of them are youth, under the age of 26 or 27." Why, I

asked him, do you think that so many Tunisian youth, directly following their own revolution, would choose to come here for two weeks or even two months, when they could still be involved in deciding the future of their own country?

“First,” he says in his gentle but firm voice, “by helping people here in Ras Ajdir, we are helping our own country... what we are doing in Ras Ajdir is firstly showing that Tunisia, during its darkest days because we have a lot of economic issues now, and during its darkest days also because we are in a very instable political situation, we still, and we can always, help the 270,000 refugees who crossed our borders, of more than 25 or 30 nationalities, during two months. We are still helping them and we will carry on helping them whatever happens in Tunisia, whatever the conditions here are – it is our duty, and we believe in it.”

“We are a part of the revolution,” even from here, he motions around with his hands.

Before we leave, Dr. Ben Miled and the staff we met invite us back to stay with them at the camp.

And, by the time of our return one week later, the sky is clear and a cool sea breeze is blowing. Dr. Ben Miled has now become Hafedh to Elizabeth and me. He introduces us to his fiancée, Rania Yagoubi, another Croissant Rouge coordinator stationed at the CRT headquarters in the northern Tunisian city of Bizerte. This is her second weeklong mission to Ras Ajdir during Hafedh’s third month of living here.

“Normally, we were supposed to get married in March, but now with all of this...” he smiles. “Inshallah soon,” Elizabeth and I respond, as consolingly as we can to the young couple.

The January “Jasmine Revolution” has since been characterized again and again by Tunisian and international media alike as a movement by the youth and for the youth. Since January 14 when ex-president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, the event that for many Tunisians symbolized the final success and realization of the revolution, young Tunisians have enjoyed more privileges and power, both social and political. They have seen the end to previous paranoia felt about discussing Ben Ali, his government and his family in public, the end to censorship especially on the internet, and more representation in governing bodies, exemplified by Selim Amamou, the young blogger that was appointed Secretary of State for Sport and Youth in the new Tunisian government on January 17. Today, in post-revolutionary Tunisia, how are the youth choosing to make use of these newfound freedoms? For many, the increased spirit of political activism has come hand in hand with an increased appetite for humanitarian work.

Rania describes to Elizabeth and me how the Croissant Rouge Tunisien experienced a dramatic jump in youth involvement directly following the revolution, more than doubling their membership in a matter of weeks. “We had 115 members, I think, before the revolution and now we have 300, 400, in our base in Bizerte,” she shares with pride.

But what exactly about the Jasmine Revolution motivated the increased interest in humanitarian organizations like the Croissant Rouge Tunisien? To me, the link was not so obvious between the surge of political street activism manifested by youth before, during, and in the direct aftermath of the revolution and between the sudden urge to do volunteer work for humanitarian organizations. Youth pop culture, in particular, seems

to do its best in romanticizing radical political street movements, often glorifying the willingness to sacrifice oneself or put oneself in way of danger in the name of anti-authoritarian struggle as the epitome of youth heroism. Often, today's youth, not only in Tunisia but internationally, don anti-police slogans, Che Guevara's iconic face or Palestinian flags on their clothing as symbols of such 'taking to the streets' type of political opposition – less often, however, does one see Red Cross/Red Crescent or United Nations logos, for example, paraded around by young protesters.

But as Rania explains, a sense of solidarity and Tunisian pride lay at the root of both the sudden enthusiasm in street activism and humanitarian involvement. She explains how the Croissant Rouge Tunisien's involvement in the revolution helped the organization gain more trust and recognition among the Tunisian public, particularly the youth who were so concerned with anything and everything relating to the movement. We are sitting in the Croissant Rouge Tunisien female volunteer tent I slept in the last night, toasty and warmed by the noontime heat, and Rania enthusiastically provides a glimpse into the Croissant Rouge Tunisien efforts during the revolution. Rania herself, for example, was part of a CRT committee that provided medical attention to victims of the revolution, protesters and activists that suffered from police brutality and various other kinds of violence. "We made some fliers and many people came to donate blood, many people came to give money," she says, "to help people that had injuries, like people who received bullet wounds." It may have been the revolutionary spirit that originally brought such people to the CRT at this time, a desire to support their fellow revolutionaries and continue the fight for freedom. But once there, people wanted to continue being involved with the Croissant Rouge. Rania recalls all the blood donors

who approached her after the blood drive, asking, “How can we become a volunteer, what can we do?” and,” she says, “like this, we recruited many volunteers.”

This sense of solidarity that brought people together both in political rebellion in the streets and in events organized by the CRT was also manifested in online communities. Discussion of the Jasmine Revolution rarely lacks mention of the use of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to organize the political action and to mobilize protests and sit-ins, but Rania added that, during and directly following the revolution, “the retaliation – the young people – also connected with one another from home on the net, especially during times of curfew,” she adds with a smile. “On Facebook, they created groups and fan pages, talking about the humanitarian activities they [were] doing, like environmental work, to clean the streets [after protests].” While the revolution undoubtedly brought Tunisian youth together in the street, marching, chanting slogans, and heroically defending their neighborhoods and provided opportunities for people to relate politically, it also provided many opportunities for people to work together in the spirit of humanitarian work. Though the media and news sources concentrated mostly on actions taken *during* the huge protests that ransacked the streets of Tunis, the aftermath of such protests called on the Tunisian people for further cooperation and depended on a spirit of generosity and giving – one they happily provided, whether by protecting their streets from pollution or by providing medical aid and attention.

In the end, actions taken by the Croissant Rouge Tunisien during the Jasmine Revolution – like the blood drive for wounded participants of the revolution – acted as good press for the organization. Such actions inspired youth to join as members of CRT,

not only to volunteer in endeavors during and related to the revolution but also in the long-term commitments and projects of the CRT, like preparing meals for the homeless at the CRT building in Tunis or volunteering at the refugee camps at Ras Ajdir. When asked how the revolution affected humanitarian work and organization in Tunisia, Rania explains that it provided CRT with a means of proving themselves to the public, “The Red Crescent was the only organization that was accepted by people in our country during this time, during the past two or three months.” She adds, “Tunisian people thought that [all other organizations] are liars, criminals, and thieves, and they are now only confident in the Red Crescent and its volunteers, because the volunteers are the people themselves, and they are young – not just old business men,” looking to make profit.

A number of other CRT members working and staying at the volunteer camp also discussed this issue of the public’s trust in humanitarian organizations, and how this relationship shifted after the revolution. When asked how the revolution affected humanitarian work in Tunisia, Marwan argued that the organizations themselves, especially the Croissant Rouge, barely changed – their principles, beliefs and goals are consistent with what they were before. What changed, he believes, is the attitude and mentality of the Tunisian people. With the fall of the Ben Ali regime, much of the system of corruption that had ruled Tunisia for the past twenty-three years also crumbled. According to Marwan, Tunisians are now much more willing and able to trust one another, especially when it comes to state-sponsored organizations like the Croissant Rouge. Before, people could not be sure if humanitarian and so-called charity organizations acted true to their name or whether they secretly profited from donations – a fear most likely swelled by Ben Ali’s wife, Leila Trabelsi, who, despite her notoriously

lavish and luxurious reputation, constantly claimed involvement with various humanitarian efforts and causes. But the shared experience between whoever fought for the revolution, shared both between the Tunisian public themselves and between the people and organizations like the CRT, brought forth a renewed sense of Tunisian identity and, along with it, a sense of confidence and solidarity in one another.

Hafedh shared these sentiments as well, “we,” indicating the volunteers, “were here [with the Croissant Rouge] before the revolution and after the revolution. The revolution hasn’t changed our attitude or our fundamental principles; what changed after the revolution is the way people act, more likely to give and help and donate, because they know that there won’t be anyone to steal from them.” He waxes poetic, “they feel that Tunisia belongs to them, to all Tunisians, and if you work for Tunisia, you work for yourself – and that’s the new thing about revolution,” and, he adds, “it was a peaceful revolution so we don’t fear anyone and we trust all together, we trust each other – that’s a new thing.”

But this change in attitude about humanitarian efforts has not been a uniform or universal one for all Tunisians, nor has the revolution only affected organizations like the CRT in positive ways. In the past three days, including the days we spent at the camp, residents of Ben Gardane, the nearest town, have shown up in angry mobs at the refugee camps. Like many regions of Tunisia, particularly in the south, Ben Gardane suffers from severe unemployment and residents keep showing up at the camps in protest of the presence of volunteers. The Ben Gardanians, as the volunteers refer to them, are under the belief that the volunteers from the Croissant Rouge are paid employees and no matter how many times CRT representatives try to explain that they are volunteers who choose

to come here on their own time and budget, the Ben Gardanians cannot be shaken from their belief otherwise. “It’s a problem of mentality,” says a twenty-four year old volunteer named Mahdi, “they don’t understand, or want to understand, the concept of volunteer [work].” Instead, the Ben Gardanians believe that these young volunteers are coming from various parts of Tunisia and essentially stealing employment opportunities that should belong to southern Tunisian residents themselves.

The situation has been swiftly becoming more and more serious during my stay at the camp. My second day there, very few volunteers were even allowed to leave the Croissant Rouge camp, due to security issues at the refugee camps and threats posed by the Ben Gardane residents. Rumors circulate amongst the volunteers too that the Ben Gardanians have been claiming to have a ‘red list’ of specific volunteers that they are after. Understandably, an air of restlessness and disappointment lingers around the volunteer camp these days, not only from a sense of fear from such threats but also frustration that fellow Tunisians would try so hard and succeed in hindering the volunteers’ progress.

The previous night, Marwan spoke with me about what he felt was the dark side of the revolution. The newfound freedoms ushered in by the revolution constitute a blessing, he believes, but also a curse. “People need to know the limits of their freedom,” he argues, concerned over the heightened, and often misplaced, sense of entitlement that certain people feel in the post-revolutionary context – like the Ben Gardanians, whose feeling of entitlement for employment has led them to violently demand paid work from none other than a non-profit organization.

Such concerns of the volunteers come after a week of growing unrest around the country, particularly in Tunis, where a nightly curfew has been reinstated for the first time since directly following the revolution. To many Tunisians, it seems as though the ‘honeymoon’ phase of the revolution is coming to a close as the solidarity and optimism felt during the movement and after its success start slowly to crumble. People have found themselves increasingly polarized between Islamist parties and secularist parties, a phenomenon that splinters greater population into disjointed factions that few even had time to consider or foresee during the exciting and invigorating events of the revolution. On May 5, a former interior minister, Farhat Rajhi, warned that if the popular Islamist party, al-Nahda, won the elections scheduled in July, a coup d’état would be likely and that members of the former party in power, RCD, may be restored to power.² Rajhi’s oracular message exploded on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter overnight as people shared the video and violent protests and destructive riots erupted in the capital and its surrounding suburbs in the following week. People across the country find themselves once more worried about the stability and security of their country, unsure of what can be trusted as safe – a familiar feeling experienced by many in the weeks following the Jasmine Revolution as well.

But in face of the instability of the country at large and the inability of the interim government to provide sustainable peace and order, perhaps humanitarian effort brings something to the table that raw street protests cannot. Regardless of the conditions or the political situation of the rest of the country, the volunteers at Ras Ajdir persevere with their work. Regardless of their own political, ethnic, religious, or socio-economic

² <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/05/2011551812282786.html>

backgrounds, they all share the same passion, the same goal, much like the Tunisian youth did during the days they fought for their Jasmine Revolution. Hafedh's words speak powerfully when he says, "we have been here through this because we are convinced of our principles. We cannot let them [our principles] down and go back to our homes," language referring to the sentiment of the volunteers now at Ras Ajdir while also echoing the sentiment felt by the participants of the revolution in January.

Every night, the youth at the CRT camp gather around in one tent, playing drums and singing traditional Tunisian songs but also, mostly, songs of the Jasmine Revolution. The streets of Tunis may burn with disagreement and fracture, but the sense of pride, solidarity and honor in being Tunisian that made the January opposition movement succeed so painlessly still beats vibrantly in the hearts of the volunteer community at Ras Ajdir. They are not only a "part" of the continuing revolution, but an integral and vital part of it. Through their work and their attitude, they reflect the open, welcoming, strong face of Tunisia – the face fought for during the revolution, held high and proud after the revolution, and the one that, despite all threats that may arise, must persevere in the future to do justice to the struggle of the revolution.

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