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The Draw of Revolution: Returning to Tunisia

Stephen Garrett
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The Draw of Revolution

Returning to Tunisia

Stephen Garrett

Academic Director: Mounir Khelifa

Advisor: Mohamed Limam

Georgetown University

Regional and Comparative Studies

Tunisia, Sidi Bou Said

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Abstract

Having left Tunisia for different reasons, some expatriate Tunisians chose to leave their old lives behind and return to their home country when Tunisia began its democratic transition in 2011. This report focuses on the experiences and perspectives of three returning Tunisians. Understanding these individuals' views provides a new framework for understanding the path that Tunisia's democratic transition has taken over the past seven years. Comparing their perspectives on themes relating to their shared experiences reveals differences and similarities. Interviewees largely differ with regards to their lives before the revolution, their previous political activity, the details of their return, their current occupation and personal views of best way to contribute to the democratic transition, and their initial expectations. On the other hand, interviewees largely hold in common their motivations for returning, current feelings about the transition, feelings about the future of the transition, reasons for remaining in Tunisia after seven years, and feelings about the role of returning Tunisians in the transition discourse. Understanding their journeys also reveals the emotional pull of the Tunisian revolution on Tunisians living abroad, a pull that changed their lives.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Tunisia is a country with a history of migration. Located at the African continent's northern crest, along the Mediterranean's southern edge, it is a country at a geographical junction between land and sea, and between Africa and Europe. For centuries, people have moved through the country, and with them goods, languages, cultures, and ideas. As a result, Tunisia has a very diverse identity. Ethnically, it is primarily Amazigh and Arab, but black and European Tunisians are also present. Arabic is the official language, but Tounsi Arabic is the primary spoken language, and owing to its heavy use in education, French is also commonly used. Evidence of cultural exchange with Europe is readily seen in the Tounsi Amazighen and Arabic dialect, which also has Latin roots and includes loanwords from French, Italian, and even Turkish. Carthage, located near Tunisia's capital city of Tunis, was ruled first as Punic and then as Roman city for centuries before the Arab's took control in 698 A.D.. More recently, Tunisia was ruled as a French protectorate from 1881 to 1956. This is all to say that Tunisia's place at a geographical crossroads has had a significant impact on its politics, its culture, its language, and especially its people. Recently, Tunisia's geographical proximity to Europe, as well as the prevalence of French, and to a lesser extent Italian, in the country have made emigrating to Europe an exciting possibility for many Tunisians, despite it being for some time a destination country for Italian and Maltese citizens. The reasons for emigration are as numerous as the number of migrants, but some major factors are job seeking and education. According to the Office of Tunisians Abroad (the French acronym being OTE, or Office des Tunisiens à l'Étranger), the Tunisian diaspora's population numbered around 1.3 million, or 12% of the total Tunisian population.¹ Many of these Tunisians hold dual-citizenship and are firmly settled in their new countries. However, the 2011 Tunisian revolution², which saw the

¹ Administrator, "Tunisians living abroad, figures and statistics of OTE," *Citoyens Des Deux Rives*, December 28, 2015.

² Many speak about "a coup" (*révolution de palais*), others speak about "political revolution"

removal of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years in power, inspired some of these Tunisians to return to the country of their birth. They returned to participate in Tunisia's democratic transition and to contribute to a broad movement towards renewing the country. They are a fascinating group with diverse motivations, opinions, and world-views. Tunisian expatriates who returned to Tunisia in the wake of the 2011 revolution, many of whom continue to contribute to the democratic project to this day, hold uniquely informed perspectives on the country's democratic transition.

Overview

My objective for this project is to examine the experience of some returning Tunisians and to gather their perspective on Tunisia's democratic transition. Specifically I examined characteristics of subjects' accounts that tied individual accounts together or set them apart. The demographic I am addressing in this report is quite specific, so for clarity's sake I will make it clear what I am not focusing on this paper. First, I am not focusing on members of the Tunisian diaspora community, though all of the subjects were a part of and connected to that community. I will discuss the community in general. Second, I am not focusing on Tunisians who returned prior to the revolution or Tunisians who left Tunisia solely for educational purposes and then returned immediately following the end of their educational experience. I am examining Tunisians who left Tunisia before 2011 and returned, perhaps leaving their old lives behind, after the revolution in order to contribute in some way to the project of democracy building. My intent is to bring attention to this unique group of Tunisians and evaluate their characteristics. The research for this paper was conducted entirely in northern Tunisia in April and May, 2018.

Literature Review

Examining the experiences and perspectives of the target group of returning Tunisians is a novel venture, as far as I am able to tell. As a result, there is no body of preexisting

scholarship on the topic. This is exciting, and it means the project must find a place within existing literature. First, it makes sense to place this report under migration studies. The demographic is defined by migration, both from Tunisia and back to it. The report also examines motivations for migration. Second, this report falls under a sociopolitical umbrella, since it relates most closely to studies of popular perceptions of Tunisia's political system. In sum, this report finds itself in two categories: migration studies and sociopolitical studies. All of the existing literature that I could find on migration studies and Tunisia focuses on emigration from Tunisia (not a focus of this report), so I became acquainted with that literature. One important piece was entitled "Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?" by Katharina Natter for Migration Policy Institute.³ Not only does this piece present a compelling history of Tunisia and migration, but it also focuses on direct effects of the 2011 revolution on migration trends. For example, it argues that the post-revolution boom of NGOs led to more oversight of migration and protection of migrants' rights. Another piece, a Stefano Torelli article for the European Council on Foreign Relations, dispels myths surrounding Tunisia-EU migration trends, such as the notion that Tunisia lets migrants go to Europe clandestinely to extort Italy for migration control funds.⁴ Another piece on a similar topic to the Torelli piece is "The Myth of Invasion" by Hein de Haas for Third World Quarterly, which discusses the paradox surrounding the Africa to Europe migration situation, a paradox which centres on the contradictory demand for cheap labour and the political antipathy toward migrants.⁵ All of these pieces focus on emigration from Tunisia. There is literature on return migration; most of it focuses on Tunisians who emigrated and then returned for reasons not primarily relating to their desire to contribute to the democratic transition. Still, two pieces are worth noting. The first is a 2011 article for *Diaspora for Development in Africa* entitled "Return

³ Katharina Natter, "Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?," Migration Policy Institute, May 28, 2015.

⁴ Stefano Torelli, "Escaping from Tunisia," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 10, 2017.

⁵ Hein de Haas, "The Myth Of Invasion," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 7 (February 25, 2009): 1305–22.

migration and small enterprise development in the Maghreb,” and it analyses a study of return migrants from across the Maghreb.⁶ The second is the introduction to a book on return migration and social wellbeing; it is titled “The interface between return migration and psychosocial wellbeing” and it discusses a duality – much like the one this report examines.⁷ The most useful piece for my research is a report from Peace Research Institute Oslo, and it addresses reasons for return migration.⁸ It does not narrow in on Tunisia, but it offers a great deal of insight into motivations for returning. Since this is a new topic, there is no existing literature on returning Tunisians’ perceptions of Tunisia, so I focused on existing resources that examine more general perceptions. Taking time to examine these sources allowed me to place my research and analysis more acutely in a theoretical context. It is also worth noting the sources that helped formulate my understanding of Tunisian politics more broadly. These include, but are not limited to, *The dawn of the Arab uprisings: end of an old order?* by Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer, and Ziad Abu-Rish⁹; *The making of the Tunisian revolution: contexts, architects, prospects*, edited by Nouri Gana¹⁰; “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy” by Rached Ghannouchi¹¹; “Social media and protest mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian revolution” by Anita Breuer, Todd Landman, and Dorothea Farquhar¹²; and “Managing Transition” by Ibrahim Sharqieh from *The African Renaissance and the Afro-Arab Spring*¹³, among many others.

⁶ Flore Gubert and Christophe J. Norman, “Return Migration and Small Enterprise Development in the Maghreb,” *Diaspora For Development in Africa*, 2011, 103–26.

⁷ Zana Vathi, “The Interface between Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing,” *Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing*, 2017, 1–18.

⁸ Jørgen Carling et al., “Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration” (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2015).

⁹ Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer, and Ziad Abu-Rish, eds., *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Nouri Gana, ed., *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Rached Ghannouchi, “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 2016.

¹² Anita Breuer, Todd Landman, and Dorothea Farquhar, “Social Media and Protest Mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution,” *Democratization* 22, no. 4 (2015): 764–92.

¹³ Ibrahim Sharqieh, “Managing Transition,” in *The African Renaissance and the Afro-Arab Spring, A Season of Rebirth?* (Georgetown University Press, 2015), 63–70.

Methodology

Conducting research for this report was a multifaceted process. The first facet was background research. This was achieved in two ways. The first was through attending lectures from prominent members of Tunisia's political scene and civil society as part of SIT's Study Abroad program. The group of lecturers included Asma Nouira, President of the Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique, on the subject of women, Islam and the revolution; Najla Abbess, Co-founder of Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes, on women in Tunisian politics today; and Hafedh Chekir, demographer and statistician, on youth demographics and civil engagement in Tunisia. Through these lectures, and others, I learned a great deal of information that supported further research and the writing of this paper. The second facet of background research was researching migration studies materials and studies of Tunisian public opinion and civil engagement. This allowed me to place my report in a more specific context.

The second facet of my research was interviews with returning Tunisians. I placed a high value on interviews because they are dynamic and allowed me to ask follow-up and clarifying questions. Given the impracticality of speaking to a great number of returning Tunisians, I did my best to speak to influential Tunisians who can, to some extent, speak for other returning Tunisians, as well as themselves. I also sought a diversity of experience from my interviewees. Before I commenced researching, I anticipated difficulty in identifying returning Tunisians. In fact, I received invaluable help from interviewees, teachers, and my advisor in identifying a number of interviewees. The biggest obstacle turned out to be arranging interviews with potential subjects, due largely to lack of responsiveness or availability. This obstacle was largely a product of my limited timeframe, as well as my research's coincidence with Tunisia's municipal election campaign. The interviewees that were responsive and available proved to be absolutely delightful and extremely insightful, and they offered me a profound view into their individual lived experiences and viewpoints.

I conducted interviews with three individuals: two women and one man. Interviewees ranged in age from 29 to 56 years old. Interviews were conducted between April 25 and May 2, 2018. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 20 minutes and 38 minutes. While I began each interview with the same set of questions, I chose to ask follow-up and clarifying questions. Prepared questions, along with asked questions, are listed in the appendix. All interviewees consented to my recording the audio of our interviews for my personal reference. Interviews were conducted in English.

There were several limitations in my methodology. The first is limited representation. Interviewing fewer returning Tunisians allowed me to analyse the interviews deeply, but hearing from more people would reveal stronger patterns and themes. This would also have enabled a greater diversity of opinion. Another limitation is bias. There are a few ways that bias could have affected this report. The first source is my questionnaire. Although I sought to ask unbiased questions driven by research and approved by my advisor, my choice to ask additional questions means I could have introduced bias into my questioning. My identity as an American also affected my approach and may have affected the responses from the interviewees. Working with a Tunisian advisor allowed me to offset some biases but certainly not all, and due to my own limitations I am unable to determine specifically how bias affected this report.

Research Findings and Discussion

Overview

The means by which I will relay the findings of my research is as follows: I will list the general themes of my questions and then discuss them category by category. I will place emphasis, by my own discretion, on whether the response to the theme among the interviewees was relatively consistent or varied. In this way I will present linkages and differences. Given

the non-representative sample size, it would be a mistake to generalise these findings to a broader population, but perhaps the experiences and views of these individuals, particularly those that they all share, can serve as a starting point for understanding this demographic.

As stated previously, I interviewed three returning Tunisians about their experiences. The first was Khawla Ben Aicha, a Member of the Tunisian Parliament formerly of the party Nidaa Tounes and currently of Machrou3 Tounes. Her constituency is Tunisians living abroad in the France 1 district. The second was Hedi Ben Abbes, who helped found the Congress for the Republic Party (CPR), was elected to the Parliament in 2011 and served as Secretary of State for American and Asian Affairs and Advisor to the President under the Hamad Jebali government of 2011-2013, and is currently General Manager at Maghreb Healthcare Services. The third is Omezzine Khelifa, Founder and CEO of Mobdiun Creative Youth, a former advisor to the Minister of Finance, a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader, a World Bank consultant, and a former member of the party Ettakatol.

The following comprise the themes I will discuss:¹⁴

1. Life before returning
2. Affiliation with the revolution and previous political activity
3. Motivation for returning
4. The act of returning
5. Current occupation and views of best way to contribute to the democratic transition
6. Underreported aspects of the transition
7. Expectations, present reality, and the future
8. Role of returning Tunisians

¹⁴ Questions in appendices

1. Life before returning

My interviewees all lived very different lives prior to returning to Tunisia. Ben Aicha taught at French business schools and had her own business consulting on marketing and communications for French companies. Ben Abbes also lectured, but was much more established. He was a lecturer at University of Franche-Comté in France and had been since 1993. Prior to that he taught at the University of Toronto. Khelifa lived in Paris and worked “for a software provider and for financial services”¹⁵. All of them have French citizenship along with Tunisian.

2. Affiliation with the revolution and previous political engagement

Ben Aicha and Khelifa were not active in politics or affiliated with the revolution prior to 2011. Ben Aicha said that in fact she “just voted” in Tunisia’s 2011 elections, and only decided to become politically active because after the 2011 revolution and the subsequent elections she “felt guilty” for not doing enough to engage in – and encourage others to engage in – Tunisian politics.¹⁶ She also felt she did not do enough to support secular parties vis-a-vis Islamist parties. Khelifa was also not engaged politically, being well-established in Paris, and her engagement with the revolution was primarily through witnessing events on Facebook.¹⁷ Ben Abbes, however, admits that he was fairly engaged in politics prior to 2011, though his engagement was with the “clandestine opposition in Europe” to Ben Ali.¹⁸ In France, he “along with the former President Doctor Marzouki [...] created together the CPR party.”¹⁹ Ben Abbes returned to Tunis on January 16, 2011 because despite his best efforts he could not find a flight that arrived on the 14th. He immediately joined the demonstrations and then soon after worked

¹⁵ Omezzine Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa, interview by Stephen Garrett, In-Person, May 2, 2018.

¹⁶ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

¹⁷ Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

¹⁸ Hedi Ben Abbes, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbes, interview by Stephen Garrett, In-Person, April 26, 2018.

¹⁹ Ben Abbes.

to re-establish the CPR party in Tunisia for the first time in nine years, since it was banned by Ben Ali.²⁰

3. Motivation for returning

Along with the differences in their previous lives, all of my interviewees were drawn back to Tunisia by distinct forces. Ben Abbes returned impulsively to Tunisia in early 2011, having in 2010 made the “blind decision” to return because he saw it as a duty.²¹ Khelifa followed the events in Tunisia online, and in December 2010 saw a video on Facebook of people running from tear gas and police gunfire. She noted that before this video (and others like it) appeared on her Facebook, people mostly shared content like holiday pictures; from this change she sensed a shift. She made the decision to participate in the transition just after Ben Ali fled, but she did not decide to actually return to Tunisia until discussing the matter with other young Tunisians in France.²² All of these people – the “elites of Tunisia abroad” –, “were very aware that the most efficient work we could do was in Tunisia, not in Paris, but nobody was willing to take the risk or make the move”.²³ Khelifa herself, however, realised that returning to her previous life was not an option and began the process of moving. She traveled frequently between Paris and Tunis between January and April of 2011 to participate in many conferences, meetings, and press conferences of different groups.²⁴ Ben Aicha returned symbolically in 2012 when she joined the newly-formed Nidaa Tounes party while in France, but only returned to Tunisia when she was elected to Parliament in 2014 as a representative of Tunisians in the France 1 district. Her motivation for running was also distinct from the other interviewees.²⁵ Both Khelifa and Ben Abbes returned to help *forge* a new

²⁰ Ben Abbes.

²¹ Ben Abbes.

²² Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

²³ Khelifa.

²⁴ Khelifa.

²⁵ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

government wholly distinct from the previous system, but Ben Aicha became politically involved after the revolution and thus her motivations for running were based on *furthering* the new democratic cause and correcting issues such as lack of youth representation. These two motivations are not opposites, but they speak to a rapid shift over only a couple of years from a collective mindset of establishing to one of revising.

Each interviewee came back in a different way for different reasons. Ben Aicha returned when she was elected, Ben Abbas returned to re-establish the CPR party and participate in the demonstrations, and Khelifa returned to determine the best way to serve her country and to do it.

4. The act of returning

For all of the interviewees, moving back to Tunisia was a significant decision. Not only is moving logistically difficult, but the circumstances of the move, including its immediacy and its emotional significance, were particularly demanding. Omezzine Khelifa told me that for her the process of moving took three to five months; she had to quit her job, leave her house, her car, and everything else behind.²⁶ Moving to Tunisia was the start of a new life. For Hedi Ben Abbas, the impulse to act was exciting because he had been searching for it for years, and when it became obvious to him that *this* was the moment he knew he must seize the opportunity. He never expected Ben Ali to leave, so the whole moment was “unbelievable” to him.²⁷ Despite the gravity of the decision, a decision that included leaving behind his family and his job, he said “it was not difficult for me just to respond to that internal personal impulse and to come to Tunisia and participate.”²⁸ This is significant because it reveals the emotion associated with returning. The reasons for this are manifold, and I will discuss some later in

²⁶ Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

²⁷ Ben Abbas, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbas.

²⁸ Ben Abbas.

this report. Khawla Ben Aicha's situation was slightly different because it did not at first mean leaving behind her life in France, but it did mean a career change and a renewed vision for her own path. She became head of communications for the French section of Nidaa Tounes and ran for Parliament in 2014 to represent the voices of Tunisians abroad and to introduce more youth representation to the Parliament. Things became more complicated when she won, and she split time between France and Tunis for the first year and then left everything behind to settle in Tunisia. Now, as an MP, it is difficult for her to return to France, even though she is obligated to in order to visit her constituency, because there is so much to do at the Assembly.²⁹

For all of the interviewees, moving back to Tunisia disrupted their previous lives. For them to take the chance and change their lives, forgoing in some cases all of their previous work, is an impressive statement of commitment and also reveals something about the power of revolution to disrupt lives far outside a country's borders. Though all the interviewees returned to contribute to something bigger than themselves, the most affected thing was ultimately themselves and their individual lives.

5. Current occupation and views of best way to contribute to the democratic transition

A realisation I made in interviewing returning Tunisians in three different occupational fields is that each person sees their current contribution to Tunisia's democratic transition differently. First, their current occupational affiliation with the transition: Ben Aicha is an MP, Ben Abbes writes papers analysing and proposing changes to the transition, and Khelifa leads an NGO. All of these paths contribute to Tunisia's democracy. Ben Aicha sees serving in politics as important because "only political parties run countries" and "in making policies and running the country I think the best thing is to be in politics."³⁰ Ben Abbes sees writing papers

²⁹ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

³⁰ Ben Aicha.

and a book, while “very, very modest”, as useful because besides introducing new ideas into the political discourse, he “hopes” that his writing may also “launch another debate in the country” to “ignite something more positive” and “create a new process which [...] is a positive competition rather than a negative competition.”³¹ Khelifa sees running an NGO as important because an NGO is politically involved but “doesn’t take sides [...] but still we have a vision for how society should be and how Tunisian democracy should look.”³² In addition, she appreciates that an NGO can address issues that politicians overlook. Civil society, she said, contributes crucially to democracy by building trust in cultural democracy. People “give you the benefit of the doubt” because an NGO is not necessarily seeking political power. An NGO can forge dialogues with politicians and build trust “among a wider circle.”³³

Each interviewee contributes to Tunisia’s democracy differently, and they also have distinct views of the *best* way to contribute. Ben Aicha, as a politician, feels that politics is the best way to contribute because, as stated above, she acknowledges that within Tunisia’s government framework the power is invested in political parties. This sentiment perhaps speaks to a previous idea, that of establishing vis-à-vis revising a system. Ben Aicha sees the system as given and seeks to contribute most effectively within that system. She also acknowledges that other roles contribute to Tunisia’s democracy. She specifically mentions investors and businessmen, and also civil society. For Khelifa, who has worked in both politics and civil society, the latter is more effective. She believes that the people “have lost faith” in politics because it appears to be all about claiming power.³⁴ Civil society organisations, she argues, have the ability to narrow their scopes and effectively address specific issues. They also have more freedom to raise funds than political parties. Finally, people trust civil society organisations because civil society organisations are not seen as related to political power, even

³¹ Ben Abbas, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbas.

³² Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

³³ Khelifa.

³⁴ Khelifa.

if they engage with politics. People, Khelifa suggests, are less cynical about NGOs than political parties, and therefore NGOs are effective in showing individuals how democracy can work for them. In other words, in a country that is not used to democracy, civil society can sometimes demonstrate the system's efficacy more effectively than the government.³⁵ Ben Abbes shares a wholly different perspective on ways to contribute to democracy-building. He takes a more modest approach; instead of arguing that his current model of contribution is best, he suggests that the value in his work is that he is acting at all. He writes, he says, to pay off "a debt I feel towards my country".³⁶ Perhaps his humble sentiment reflects his work sounding less impactful than work in politics or civil society, but at face value his efforts are largely personal. This latter possibility furthers the notion of return as an intensely personal and emotional decision, one that still makes an impact years later.

6. Underreported aspects of the transition

Given each of my interviewee's intimate knowledge of Tunisia's democratic transition, I decided to ask them if there was something they witnessed that was underreported or under-discussed. Ben Aicha and Ben Abbes both offered very optimistic answers. Ben Aicha said that being in the heart of the system, constantly surrounded by politics and democracy-building and high expectations, she sometimes overlooks Tunisia's progress. It is only when she hears international observers discuss Tunisia's progress that she realises just how far the country has come.³⁷ Ben Abbes offered a similarly "less tangible" response.³⁸ He says that it is his own "intimate, personal conviction" that Tunisians "made that crossing of the frontier in their own minds" after the 2011 revolution. This frontier separates the "dictatorial way of thinking" prior

³⁵ Khelifa.

³⁶ Ben Abbes, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbes.

³⁷ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

³⁸ Ben Abbes, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbes.

to 2011 from the subsequent “democratic way of thinking.”³⁹ In other words, he believes that Tunisia will never return to a Ben Ali-style of dictatorship, even though democracy is still very young. When people suggest a return, he says, it is due to momentary dissatisfaction, not a fundamental desire for the old system.⁴⁰ Khelifa offered a less optimistic answer. Hers is a more tangible response, one that is not unsurprising given her line of work. She believes that the issue of youth at risk of radicalisation is underreported, and that the lack of connection between the elites of the country and the youth is troubling. She also believes that the leaders during the transition did not uphold the values of the revolution, as many of them argued against necessary changes to the old system.⁴¹

7. Expectations, present reality, and the future

Ben Aicha and Ben Abbes acknowledge that they had very high hopes at the time of the revolution. Ben Abbes said that he was “full of hope, full of dreams” for Tunisia’s future.⁴² For someone long engaged in Tunisian opposition politics by 2011, the prospect of Ben Ali leaving was unbelievable. However, Ben Abbes says that he made a miscalculation, and that his expectations were too high: “I wrongly thought that we were enough mature [sic] to transport the movement into something tangible and that we are going to be able to show the link between democracy and democratic principles and values [...] and economic and human prosperity.”⁴³ I asked him if his high expectations for democracy were due to his exposure to French and Canadian democracy. He answered in the affirmative. He said that when he moved

³⁹ Ben Abbes.

⁴⁰ Ben Abbes.

⁴¹ Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

⁴² Ben Abbes, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbes.

⁴³ Ben Abbes.

to France at age 19, “I was really very receptive to French culture and values and democracy.”⁴⁴ He was exposed to ideas about human rights and democracy that were not sufficiently taught to him in Tunisia. Ben Aicha tells a similar story. When she decided to run, in large part because she wanted to be a young, female, secular voice in Tunisia’s government, her expectations for Tunisia’s democracy were heavily influenced by her experience with the French system. She, too, was “full of hope.”⁴⁵ When she came back, she wanted things to move faster than they actually did. She found the system to be limited: MPs have no personal offices, no personal assistants, and traveling to see her constituents, as previously mentioned, is very difficult. She told me that “things are harder than we expected.”⁴⁶

Omezzine Khelifa had different expectations. She told me that when she decided to return, she had “more fears than hopes.”⁴⁷ She decided, though, that being involved in politics meant there was no room for fear. The hope she did have sprung from the Tunisian people. She had always been taught under Ben Ali’s regime that there was no hope for the country, since the people of Tunisia would always look out for themselves in lieu of the collective. When she witnessed the revolution, with its marches and demonstrations across the country, she found hope. That people were acting for the greater good of the country inspired her. When I asked her if her expectations were informed by France or other countries, she said “not at all.”⁴⁸ She knew Tunisia would require a different system, and she was not happy to see so many people trying to emulate the French or American system. Those systems, she said, were formed long ago in a very different context from Tunisia in 2011. She preferred to not use foreign models for anything more than benchmarks.⁴⁹ Khelifa’s perspective is particularly interesting because of her having more fears than hopes. Returning with more fears than hopes reemphasises the

⁴⁴ Ben Abbes.

⁴⁵ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

⁴⁶ Ben Aicha.

⁴⁷ Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

⁴⁸ Khelifa.

⁴⁹ Khelifa.

intense emotional power that returning has. Despite the fears outweighing the hopes, Khelifa knew what she must do.

All three of my interviewees hold similar views about Tunisia's future, views I would describe as very cautiously optimistic. Ben Aicha acknowledges that progress has been made in spite of problems with the current system. Events like the municipal elections on May 6, 2018 can serve to make government work for the people for effectively.⁵⁰ Ben Abbas is still hopeful, despite his belief that Tunisian politics is currently too negative and not focused enough on self-improvement. He remains a part of the transition effort because he is not hopeless. He strongly believes that Tunisia will continue to improve, and also feels profoundly attached to the country.⁵¹ Although Khelifa thinks Tunisia is at risk of becoming corrupt, she is also hopeful because she has seen that "change is possible in Tunisia."⁵² She knows people who left Tunisia after some years because change was not happening quickly enough, and often because another country offered a better professional opportunity or better infrastructure and services. Anecdotally, a common reason for people to leave is the difficulty of converting Tunisian dinars to other currencies, which disadvantages Tunisians paid in dinars. The reason Khelifa is still here, despite those same concerns, is that she feels that in France she was a "drop in the ocean," only helping her company make more of a profit.⁵³ In Tunisia she makes a meaningful impact, helping to bring about positive, lasting change for her country and for other Tunisian people.⁵⁴

8. Role of returning Tunisians

⁵⁰ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

⁵¹ Ben Abbas, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbas.

⁵² Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

⁵³ Khelifa.

⁵⁴ Khelifa.

Despite their different backgrounds and opinions, all interviewees feel that returning Tunisians offer a substantive voice to Tunisia's public discourse. Ben Abbes, for example, believes that having lived in a democracy, being exposed to the culture of democracy in a way that goes beyond theory, allows returning Tunisians to provide better insight into the implementation of "democratic rules" than people who have not lived in democracy before.⁵⁵ Democracy is a culture, he says, and "it has to be in the very fabric of the mind of the elite, at least."⁵⁶ The diaspora, then, has a "moral obligation towards this country to get involved in politics and through their behaviour and way of thinking may contribute in the implementation of democratic values. [...] The contribution would be very significant if we get involved and if we jump into the project of implementing democracy without hesitation."⁵⁷ His answer points to a notion that there are different ways to understand democracy, and that there is more than one form of democrat. A Tunisian who lives abroad in a democratic context may therefore understand certain consequences of democracy more deeply than a Tunisian who has not (one possible example: a more decentralized bureaucracy and its effect on regulation enforcement). He also does not necessarily mean that every Tunisian who spent time in a democracy understands the culture of democracy better than any other Tunisian *per se*. For Ben Aicha, her role as a returning Tunisian is tied closely to her role as an MP representing Tunisians abroad. For the Tunisian government to understand the desires and opinions of the Tunisian diaspora community, there must be advocates on their behalf offering their unique perspective.⁵⁸ Khelifa told me she is not sure if returning Tunisians have a unique perspective, but they certainly have "a diverse one."⁵⁹ She believes that her own views are more based in things she learned in

⁵⁵ Ben Abbes, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbes.

⁵⁶ Ben Abbes.

⁵⁷ Ben Abbes.

⁵⁸ Ben Aicha, Interview with Khawla Ben Aicha.

⁵⁹ Khelifa, Interview with Omezzine Khelifa.

Tunisia, as opposed to just her experience abroad, but acknowledges that hearing from diverse voices and finding a consensus is very important.⁶⁰

Discussion

From interviews with three of Tunisia's movers and shakers I learned a great deal more about Tunisia's political future and recent past than any book I previously read. The one element of their experiences that struck me the most was the gravity of the decision to return to Tunisia. Seven years later for Hedi Ben Abbes and Omezzine Khelifa, and four years ago for Khawla Ben Aicha, the emotion of that time is still evident. Perhaps the passion they all feel for Tunisia, as well as the passion with which they work, to this day, for progress in Tunisia, is in some ways a result of their decision to devote their lives to this massive project. For Hedi Ben Abbes, bringing about change in Tunisia was a decade-long pursuit before the once inconceivable revolution even occurred. For Omezzine Khelifa, returning to Tunisia meant a profound career shift from the corporate world to the world of public service. For Khawla Ben Aicha, dissatisfaction with the 2011 election results turned into a new life in only three years. The immediacy and profundity of these changes left a lasting impression on all three individuals, both emotionally and in terms of lifestyle. Each person came back to Tunisia at a different age, having lived different lives, with different degrees of hesitation and yet in the end the pursuit of a new future was enough to bring them all to this point in Tunisia's history. The power of the revolution, an unanticipated event with global ramifications, was both romantic and practical in its effect on returning Tunisians. Additionally, the emotional weight of the decision was heightened by Tunisia being home to all of my interviewees. Hedi Ben Abbes expressed this sentiment most directly, saying that it is important to him that his

⁶⁰ Khelifa.

attachment to the country is physical as well as emotional.⁶¹ Devotion to their home country and their fellow Tunisians is part of what motivates Ben Aicha, Ben Abbes, Khelifa, and every other Tunisian working to make their country a better place.

Conclusion

The experiences of Hedi Ben Abbes, Khawla Ben Aicha, and Omezzine Khelifa do not represent the experiences of all Tunisian expatriates who returned to Tunisia in the wake of the 2011 revolution, but what they provide are three examples of an under-analysed demographic. The interviewees largely differed with regards to their lives before the revolution, their previous political activity, the details of their return, their current occupation and personal views of best way to contribute to the democratic transition, and their initial expectations. On the other hand, interviewees were fairly consistent in terms of their motivations for returning, current feelings about the transition, feelings about the future of the transition, reasons for remaining in Tunisia after seven years, and feelings about the role of returning Tunisians in the transition discourse. The ways in which the experiences and opinions of these individuals overlap and differ can serve as a starting point for further investigation of returning Tunisians more broadly. There were limitations to my investigation that could be remedied by allowing more time for research and gathering enough participants to undertake a statistical analysis. Identifying this demographic, which I did thanks to the SIT lecture of Omezzine Khelifa, also leads me to consider other demographics of interest, including young people who participated in the revolution, members of exiled political parties who returned after 2011, and others. Each identity offers something unique to the discourse of the democratic transition, and examining

⁶¹ Ben Abbes, Interview with Hedi Ben Abbes.

different identities, including different intersections of identity, could lead to interesting insights and be an effective way to understand perception of Tunisia's path forward.

Appendices

Interview: Khawla Ben Aicha

Details:

Who: Khawla Ben Aicha, Mechrou3 Tounes

What: Interview and Contact Gathering

When: 25 April 2018 15:00

Where: ARP, Le Bardo

Questions:

1. Where were you in 2010 and what were you doing there?
2. Were you politically active before 2011?
3. When did you realise you wanted to return to Tunisia? What were the obstacles you encountered? Family?
4. Why did you return to Tunisia? What did you hope would happen?
5. Describe your experience just after you returned to Tunisia.
6. What occupation did you settle into? Why that occupation?
7. Where are you now? What do you do now? Is there a way that what you do now contributes to Tunisia's democratic transition?
8. How does your present reality compare to your early hopes?
9. You left Tunisia. Then you returned. Why did you not leave again?
10. Where is Tunisia heading? What are your hopes and fears for the near future? Long-term future?

11. What is something about the democratic transition that you have personally witnessed but receives less exposure than it deserves?
12. How far has Tunisia come from January 14, 2011 to May 6, 2018?
13. Do you know anyone else who followed a similar path to you, i.e. returning to participate in the broad movement of Tunisia towards democracy? Including people who left again

Transcript Questions

- Were you politically active at that point?
- Where were you in 2010 and what were you doing there?
- What were your hopes when you decided to run for office?
- Do some Tunisians abroad have a negative perception of how things are going here?
- Where do you see Tunisia heading? What are your hopes and fears for the short-term future?
- What is something about the democratic transition that you have personally witnessed but receives less exposure than it deserves?
- Do you think your position as a returner gives you a unique perspective on the transition?
- How far has Tunisia come from January 14, 2011 to May 6, 2018?
- Have any Tunisians living abroad returned to run in municipal elections?
- Do you think what you're doing now is the best way to contribute to the transition?

Interview: Hedi Ben Abbes

Details:

Who: Hedi Ben Abbes, Maghreb Healthcare Services

What: Interview and Contact Gathering

When: 26 April 2018 10:00

Where: Hedi's Office, Lac 2

Questions:

1. Where were you in 2010 and what were you doing there?
2. Were you politically active before 2011?
3. When did you realise you wanted to return to Tunisia? What were the obstacles you encountered? Family?
4. Why did you return to Tunisia? What did you hope would happen?
5. Describe your experience just after you returned to Tunisia.
6. What occupation did you settle into? Why that occupation?
7. Where are you now? What do you do now? Is there a way that what you do now contributes to Tunisia's democratic transition?
8. How does your present reality compare to your early hopes?
9. You left Tunisia. Then you returned. Why did you not leave again?
10. Where is Tunisia heading? What are your hopes and fears for the near future? Long-term future?
11. What is something about the democratic transition that you have personally witnessed but receives less exposure than it deserves?
12. How far has Tunisia come from January 14, 2011 to May 6, 2018?
13. Do you know anyone else who followed a similar path to you, i.e. returning to participate in the broad movement of Tunisia towards democracy? Including people who left again

Transcript Questions

00:00:00: Where were you in 2010 and what were you doing there?

00:04:06: What were your hopes at the time of the revolution?

00:06:05: What were the biggest obstacles for you returning?

00:08:28: Were your expectations of democracy in Tunisia shaped by your experience abroad?

00:11:25: Asked question: What has been your career path since 2011? Answered question: What has been Tunisia's path since 2011?

00:16:27: Do returning Tunisians, having been exposed to cultural democracy, have something unique to offer Tunisia's democratic transition?

00:20:01: What is something about the democratic transition that you have personally witnessed but receives less exposure than it deserves?

00:22:46: In what way does the work you do now contribute to Tunisia's democracy?

00:28:00: You left Tunisia. Then you returned. Why did you not leave again?

00:36:40: Do you know anyone else who followed a similar path to you, i.e. returning to participate in the broad movement of Tunisia towards democracy?

Interview: Omezzine Khelifa

Details:

Who: Omezzine Khelifa, Mobdiunp

What: Interview and Contact Gathering

When: 2 May 2018 10:30 (11:45)

Where: Coste, Sidi Bou Said

Questions:

1. Where were you in 2010 and what were you doing there?

2. Were you politically active before 2011?
3. When did you realise you wanted to return to Tunisia? What were the obstacles you encountered? Family?
4. Why did you return to Tunisia? What did you hope would happen?
5. Describe your experience just after you returned to Tunisia.
6. What occupation did you settle into? Why that occupation?
7. Where are you now? What do you do now? Is there a way that what you do now contributes to Tunisia's democratic transition?
8. How does your present reality compare to your early hopes?
9. You left Tunisia. Then you returned. Why did you not leave again?
10. Where is Tunisia heading? What are your hopes and fears for the near future? Long-term future?
11. What is something about the democratic transition that you have personally witnessed but receives less exposure than it deserves?
12. Do you know anyone else who followed a similar path to you, i.e. returning to participate in the broad movement of Tunisia towards democracy?

Transcript Questions

00:00:00: Where were you in 2010 and what were you doing there?

00:00:20: Were you politically active?

00:00:24: At what point did you hear about what was happening in Tunisia and decide that coming back was something you wanted to do?

00:01:35: What were the main obstacles for you returning?

00:04:22: What was your experience just after you returned to Tunisia?

00:09:52: What were your hopes and expectations at that point for Tunisia?

00:12:15: Were the expectations that you had shaped in part by your experience abroad and being familiar with the French system?

00:16:34: The people who were largely opposed to the diverse lists were part of the Meeting of Tunisians abroad?

00:17:10: What do you do now? Is there a way that what you do now contributes to Tunisia's democratic transition?

00:18:59: What do you think that civil society offers to the democratic transition that being in politics does not?

00:22:22: How does your present reality and current hopes and expectations compare to seven years ago?

00:25:04: Imagine someone in the same position as you, but instead of being where you are now, they left Tunisia in, say, 2016. Why did that person leave?

00:27:56: Why are you still here, still working?

00:28:54: Where is Tunisia heading now, after 7 years?

00:34:52: Do you think that people who returned have unique perspectives to offer the transition?

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