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THE POPULATION OF TUNISIA: AN EXAMPLE OF CONTACT BETWEEN MODERN CIVILIZATION AND THE MOSLEM WORLD

John I. Clarke

Mr. Clarke, who received his M.A. from the University of Aberdeen, spent a year in field work in Tunisia.

FRENCH North Africa occurs at the western extremity of the Moslem World, but the Protectorate of Tunisia is nearer the heart of Islam than Algeria or Morocco. Here we may observe the results of the impact of French civilization upon a corner of the Moslem civilization in the physical setting of contact between the Mediterranean and African worlds. Consequently, Tunisia presents many contrasts and complexities which increase the problems of administration and development. In Tunisia, as indeed in Africa generally, the Europeans tackled the question of economic development before the important social matters of education, hygiene, and nutrition, but in recent years more and more attention has been devoted to raising the status of the individual. The remarkable demographic growth since the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1881 and the changes in the distribution of the population synthesize many of the complex economic and social advances.

TUNISIA BEFORE THE FRENCH

Physically Tunisia is unlike Algeria or Morocco. Due to the convergence and lowering of the Tell and the Saharan Atlas, it contains no large zone of high plains. Moreover, there is a double maritime facade and a broad area of low plains. Apart from modifying the climatic transitions between the Mediter-

ranean and desert types, these factors have profoundly affected the history of the country. The accessibility of the low plains from land and sea has resulted in numerous external influences—Phoenician, Roman, Arab, and Turkish. So there arose a marked human contrast between the coastal regions and the interior—a feature since accentuated by the French.

Under the Turks, Tunisia was in a state of decadence. It was unable to profit from its position at the crossroads of the eastern and western Mediterranean, and its maritime prosperity had declined. Internecine warfare and anarchy prevailed as the Turkish rule faltered, and the population growth was kept in constant check. Many types of semi-nomads softened the clash between the desert and the sown, but none of these ways of life permitted dense population groupings. Town life, peculiarly well-marked in Tunisia because of maritime connections, had a great political, religious, and commercial significance and contrasted strongly with the life of the fellahs and nomads. In short, the modes of life tended to fix themselves in accordance with the physique, climate, and cultural traditions of the country. Stagnation resulted, and it is the stir from this stagnation which is the dominant feature in Tunisia and the Moslem world today.

Before the advent of the French the demographic regime in Tunisia was

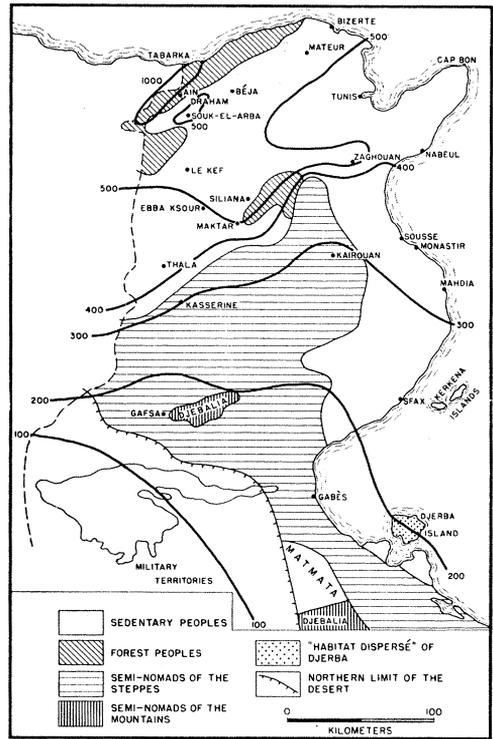


FIG. 1 (left). General map of Tunisia, showing relief.

FIG. 2 (right). Types of economy (as delimited by Jean Despois) and annual rainfall (in mms.).

“primitive,” as in other African and Asiatic communities where both birth and death rates are high and the natural increase of population limited. Islam, the backbone of the cultural environment, stressed the advantages of large families. Celibacy was almost unknown and sterility a common motive for the repudiation of a wife. The superiority of the male sex, emphasized in the Koran, meant the degradation of women as drudges, recluses, and bearers of children. Naturally women aged very quickly, and this was a primary cause of “successive polygamy.” The latter, whereby a man discarded a wife and took another, was far more widespread than “simultaneous polygamy,” and therefore more directly related to the large number of births. An abundance of children in a family motivated pride

and honor. However, a high birth rate was essential in a tribe, for wars, famine, disease, and poverty inevitably resulted in a frightful mortality.

Thus the pre-French scene was untroubled by western ideas and methods. Tunisia lay dormant in its squalor.

THE GROWTH OF POPULATION

At the last census, in 1946, Tunisia had a population of nearly three and one-quarter millions of which over nine-tenths were Moslems. In spite of statistical limitations in the census it is evident that a considerable growth occurred (about 54 per cent) between 1921 and 1946.¹ In fact, Tunisia has advanced from the “primitive” popu-

¹ The first census of the French population was made in 1886, but it was not until 1921 that it was extended to the Tunisian population (i.e., Moslems and Jews).

lation trend, and, although birth and death rates are still high, the birth rate has increased while the death rate has declined. Tunisia is by no means an isolated example of this change. Bonné has noted that the relative increase of population in most countries of the Middle East exceeds that in European countries at the time when it was greatest.² Many parts of the Moslem World have received the material benefits of Western culture which are sufficient to diminish the previous appalling mortality, but the problem of the extremely high birth rate cannot be solved by these means. It is a social and psychological question, with its roots reaching deep into the fundamental principles of Islam.

Islam in North Africa has not witnessed the complete breakdown of its traditional family systems. Despite the infiltration of European ideas, these Moslem traditions with few modifications have persisted until the present day. It is true that the position of women has somewhat improved and that polygamy has declined, but the influence of religion on the birth rate is still strong.

The death rate has declined largely as a result of the security and improved conditions of hygiene established by the French. Most of the main scourges have been practically removed, but there is still room for considerable progress. Cholera has been eliminated, and typhus, smallpox, and malaria greatly reduced, but disease and poverty account for the distressingly high infant mortality. In 1942 and 1943 the war sorely wounded economy and society, but only temporarily modified the curve of the death rate. At the moment, the youthful age composition of the population prevents too high a mortality.

² A. Bonné: "The Economic Development of the Middle East," London, 1943.

Although the growth of the population is rapid, it varies, especially locally, according to economic vicissitudes—a natural feature considering the early stage of economic development. Climatic vagaries, in a land where a large proportion of the population lives at subsistence levels, increase the hazards of the harvest and so influence popula-

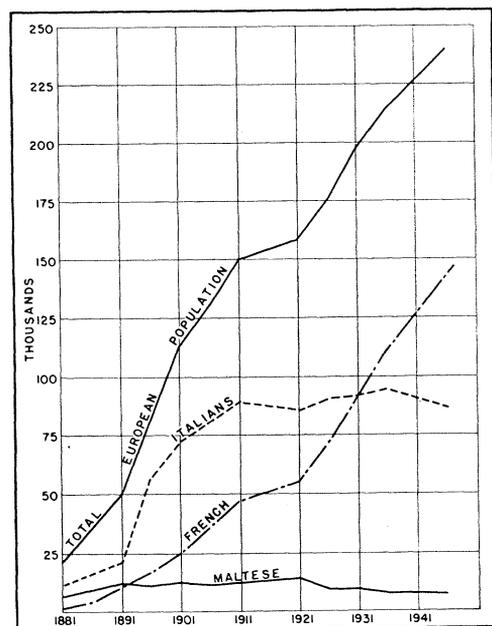
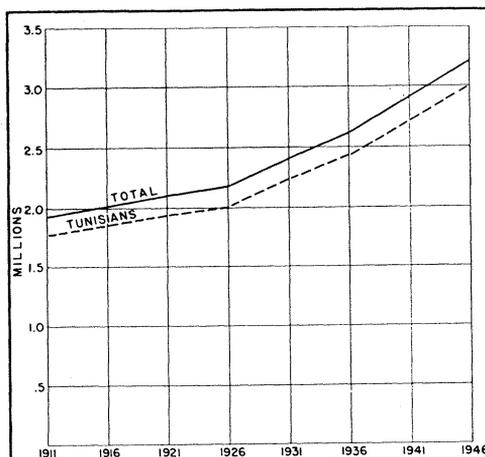


FIG. 3. Growth of Tunisian and total population, 1911-1946.

FIG. 4. Growth of European population, 1881-1946.

tion trends. These fluctuations show that from the point of view of demography Tunisia has not advanced far from the "primitive" stage. The rural and above all the nomadic areas see little of modern hygiene, and stagnation and squalor are rife.

CHANGES IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION

It is in the plains and steppes of Tunisia that we find the most remarkable changes during the French rule. Zones of movement for centuries, they now bear the marks of colonization and westernization. Naturally, for climatic reasons this is more important in the north than in the south, and for social and commercial reasons more important on the littoral than in the interior. But colonization has not been so noteworthy as in Algeria, for it has been hindered by a fairly dense native population. In 1946 there were only 239,550 Europeans in Tunisia, mainly French and Italians.³ Four-fifths are concentrated in the towns and over two-thirds in Tunis and its suburbs. Although relatively few in number, these Europeans, especially the French, have had a tremendous influence upon the economic development of the Regency. The remodelling of the rural economy of the plains and urbanization are the two factors which have had the most effect on the distribution of population.

French colonists found the plains of the middle Medjerda valley around Souk el Arba and Béja, and the lowlands of Mateur and Tunis most favorable for their agriculture. Colonization, both official and private, took place at the expense of the Moslems who then helped to form the labor force required. Wheat fields, vineyards, and olive plantations

³ 1946: French, 143,977; Italian, 84,935; Maltese, 6,459; others, 4,178 (mainly Greek and Spanish).

expand over the rich soil, but unfortunately restrict the seasonal movements of the transhumants driving their flocks of sheep in spring and early summer away from the scorched steppes to the higher, moister lands of the Tell. But in the plain of Goubellat and the drained marshes of La Mabtouha it is hoped to reinstall numerous Moslems. The area around Bizerte has remained Moslem, and apart from some Italian farmers the Cap Bon peninsula has similarly been less affected by rural colonization. Everywhere in these northern coastal plains the population is fairly dense and is increasing more rapidly than in most other parts of the country. In fact there is a constant movement towards these more favored lands.

In the Sahel behind Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia, a form of village life almost unique in French North Africa can be observed. Here for centuries sedentary folk in their small village agglomerations resisted the encroachments of the nomads of the steppes. Now, with security, the remarkable growth of olive cultivation, and the increasing sedentarization of the nomads, this region is prosperous and well populated. But the old village communities are breaking down and settlement is becoming dispersed. Olive cultivation also flourishes in the region of Sfax, thanks to a type of "dry farming," and a large area of steppe-land is now adorned with the patterns of plantations. However, villages are rare and the Sfaxian works plantations as far as 25 miles from his native city. It is interesting to note that whereas the Sahel is declining in rural and total population due to the expansion towards the west, the region of Sfax shows a marked increase.

The French policy of "fixation au sol" has mainly been applied to the semi-nomads inhabiting the steppe re-

gions adjacent to the areas of olive cultivation. There are still large numbers of nomads whose flocks vary with the vagaries of the climate. A long drought sees the decimation of these flocks, and a wave of transhumants converges upon the happier lands of the north, which are often unable to receive these unfortunates. Administrators have found that wells are more valuable for trees than sheep, and many tribes are almost without stock. Consequently there has developed a widespread internal migration of workers. The grain, vine, olive, and date harvests, the phosphate mines to the west of Gafsa, the iron mines of the Tell, and the large towns provide work for the stricken folk. Unfortunately, this unspecialized labor force is far too transient and unreliable, for it moves between the

towns, the mining centers, and the agricultural regions according to the prosperity of the latter.

On the little islands of the Kerkena and Djerba, where rainfall is low, water scarce, and soils poor, we find very dense populations. Historical conditions explain this paradoxical phenomenon. Originally places of refuge from the nomads, they have become the homes of thousands by dint of a constant struggle with the meager natural conditions. Orchards and palm groves have been planted everywhere, and fishing has progressed; but overpopulation has necessitated temporary emigration to provide a supplementary source of income. The Djerbian grocer has almost a monopoly in his trade in Tunisian towns, and may be found in all the large towns of the eastern Mediter-

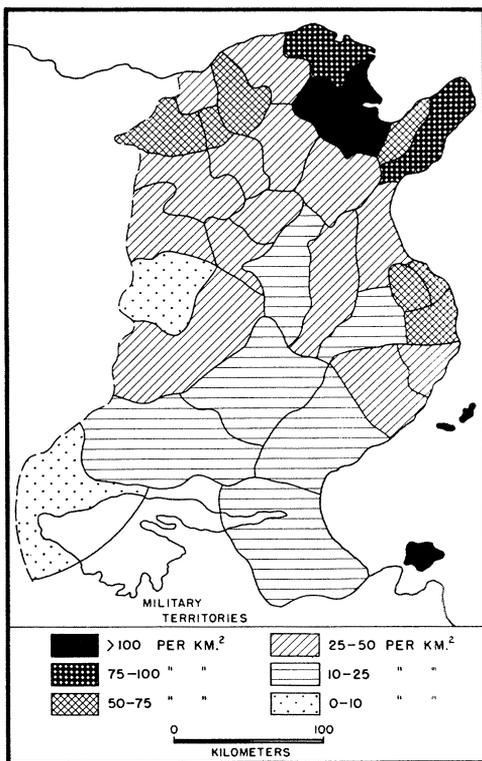
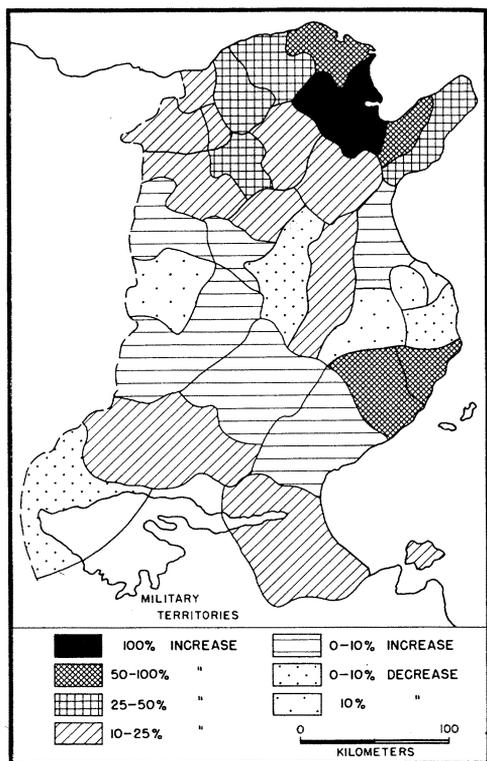


FIG. 5 (left). Percentage increase or decrease of the Moslem population in the caidats, 1936-1946.
 FIG. 6 (right). Density of the Moslem population in the caidats, 1946.

ranean and even beyond. Although the Kerkenian waiter or hotel-boy restricts his movements to Tunisia, like the Djerbian he returns periodically to his island home. The Djebali⁴ of the south performs a similar migration, for he also lives in a region unable to supply his needs. Each village of the Djebel tends to specialize in different occupations which the villagers practice in the large towns of Tunisia, above all in Tunis. The people of Ghoumrassen make and sell "beignets,"⁵ those of Guermessa sell vegetables at the central market in Tunis, while the Chenini are the newspaper boys in the capital. All these migrations are similar to those of the Mozabites of southern Algeria and the Chleuhs of southern Morocco.

The mountainous regions of the Northern Tell and the High Tell were relatively more populous before 1881 than today, for they were valued for the security that they gave against the nomads. The inhabitants of the little perched villages were always numerous, and often confederations of tribes resisted the administrative authorities. Now with the progress of security many of the mountain villages are being deserted in favor of more accessible sites in the fertile basins. But generally the conditions are not advantageous for European settlement, and only scattered French colonists are found in the High Tell. It is significant that no large towns occur here. Ancient rural souks (markets) such as Ebba Ksour, Thala, and Siliana have become permanent centers, and the French have regenerated the old Turkish towns of Le Kef and Téboursouk as administrative centers. New towns have been created (Maktar, Tabarka, Aïn Draham) and the mining of zinc, lead, iron, and phosphates and

the exploitation of the forest wealth, notably cork, have helped to prevent depopulation and economic stagnation.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The towns of Tunisia, where the European population is concentrated, have experienced a transformation even greater than the rural communities. Between 1931 and 1946 the urban population rose from 25 per cent to 32 per cent of the total. Yet Tunisia, open to the influences of the Mediterranean civilizations, has always had a well-developed urban life, and in this respect it is unique in North Africa and more akin to the Middle East. Many towns can vaunt Phoenician and Roman sites as well as magnificent Arab "medinas." Sheltered behind their ramparts, the town dwellers resisted the ravages of the nomads and followed another way of life which had strong maritime connections. Foreign commerce, fishing, and small artisanal industries were notable. Moreover, the towns were the strongholds of social and religious life. As in the Middle East⁶ there was a marked disparity between the rural and urban communities, which the Protectorate has intensified.

As the numbers of Europeans increased new quarters grew alongside the walled Arab towns, especially those with port functions. Rapidly the existence and size of these European quarters came to be the measure of the importance of the towns. They became poles of attraction for the Moslems and Jews. Certainly the weakness of the tribal framework, due to the previous centralization of authority in the person of the Bey, aided this process of urbanization which has increased in momentum during the last decade. Tunis, the political, social, and economic capital,

⁴ Man of the Djebel, or hills.

⁵ Fr.: Type of fritter or doughnut (Ar.: "ft'âyriya").

⁶ See W. B. Fisher: "The Middle East," London, 1950, pp. 120-123.

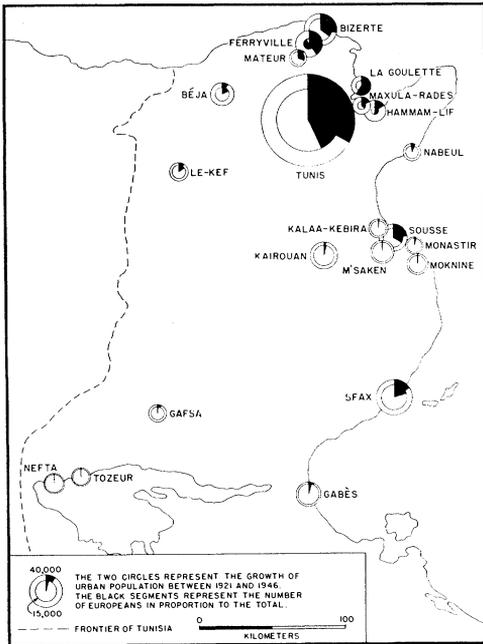


FIG. 7. Urban development in Tunisia, 1921-1946.

experiences an almost mercurial growth. In the last 30 years its numbers have risen from 172,000 to approximately 430,000. Bizerte, Sousse, and Sfax, the other three main ports, have all undergone much expansion. Sousse has been extended to the detriment of Monastir and Mahdia, whilst Gabès has suffered from the rise of the port of Sfax for the exportation of phosphates and olive oil. The ancient capital of Kairouan, like Tlemcen in Algeria situated in the interior and with only a small European population, has seen none of this modern expansion.

The appropriation of 750,000-800,000 hectares (i.e., one-fifth of the present cultivated area) for European colonization has undoubtedly repelled large numbers of Tunisians from rural areas. Drought and bad harvests in the post-war years and failures in the policy of fixation of the nomads intensified the migration towards the revived towns, and improved commercial relations,

new industries, and general economic reconstruction created possibilities of employment for many of these new town dwellers. Unfortunately "bidonvilles" or shanty towns (cf. Casablanca, Rabat, Baghdad) have recently appeared on the outskirts of Tunis especially, where Moslems live in extreme poverty. Furthermore, it is difficult to say if these folk will settle permanently in the towns. Many of them form a class of casual workers showing few capabilities or energy for any of their jobs, while others, former nomads with no trade, live as beggars. But it must not be assumed that the new urban development is entirely temporary. So far it has not produced any great changes in the demographic structure of the country, but new industrial working classes are in the embryonic stage and the professional and commercial classes are swelling their ranks with more and more Moslems and Jews.

CONCLUSION

The main need for the future is to relate the rapid demographic growth to the economy of the country. In this respect Tunisia seems to be rather fortunate for the economic resources are capable of further development. Most of the schemes for the future are naturally agricultural, as there is still an appalling fluctuation in production resulting from climatic variability. Plans for widespread irrigation along the valley of the Medjerda and in the regions of Kairouan and Kasserine are now being put into effect. Unfortunately, mechanization of agriculture has proved to be a difficult task, because it means more unemployment. Agricultural improvements have also been hampered by the conservatism of Islam and the evils of the land regime. However, in regard to the latter, the French

have solved many intricate problems. There seems to be every likelihood of an improvement in the quality and extent of agriculture, which will, it is hoped, bring about a higher standard of living in rural areas.

A more progressive agriculture will, moreover, necessitate further industrialization in the towns, and therefore absorb some of the "floating" population. One may anticipate a reduction in the birth rate as a result of this progress.

At the moment it is imperative that the clash of modern economy and

traditional ways of life should be mitigated as much as possible. Already a strong political and social reaction to western methods is gaining ground. However, the recent Government interest in the welfare of the peasants and artisans, and the attempts to improve traditional systems of farming and traditional industries have been carried out along excellent lines. Small practical developments are more sensible than grandiose schemes, and will do more to ameliorate the general standard of living.