


ARTICLE

The Left Wing Turn to Human Rights in Tunisia

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Abstract

This article explores the turn to human rights of Tunisian Maoist activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many of these Tunisians later became human rights activists. I argue against prevailing views that ideological changes toward human rights in the late 1970s were the result of paradigmatic ideological shifts or the demise of socialist, anti-imperialist thinking, or an outcome of international human rights norm diffusion. Doubt or loss of faith in some or all parts of Marxism-Leninism led to a diversity of ideological transformations that were complex and hybrid. Drawing on interviews with former Tunisian Maoists, as well as on their writings, the article outlines the political and ideological environment in which they operated. It describes their solidarity work for political prisoners and explores their encounter with Amnesty International as well as the Tunisian League for Human Rights in its first years of existence, showcasing how multiple approaches to human rights existed among the activists.

Keywords: activism; human rights; leftists; political history; prisoners; Tunisia

The 1970s are regarded as the decade that catalyzed the diffusion of UN human rights norms internationally.¹ This is seen as a result of, among other factors, the increased moralization of American politics, the Helsinki process, Latin American oppositional movements, and the growth of Amnesty International.² Different interpretations exist among scholars of how human rights were introduced on the international political scene. The process has been described as the outcome of an epistemological shift comprising the “collapse of prior universalistic schemes, and the construction of human rights as a persuasive alternative to them,” or “the failure of older political projects, of transcending the logic of the Cold

¹ Stefan Ludwig Hoffman, “Introduction: Genealogies of Human Rights,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–29; Kenneth Cmiel, “The Recent History of Human Rights,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27–53; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Michael C. Morgan, “The Seventies and the Rebirth of Human Rights,” in *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, ed. Niall Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 237–50.

² Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists without Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ann Marie Clark, *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Daniel C. Thomas, “Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy,” in *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, ed. Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 71–96; Kathryn Sikkink, *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

War . . . and of reaching a vantage point that supposedly was above politics.”³ It also has been suggested that the human rights history of the decade was complex and not merely a reflection of epistemological shifts, indicating the need for exploring microhistories as well as the multiple and diverse meanings that have been attributed to human rights.⁴

Different views also exist among Middle East and North Africa (MENA) scholars on the emergence of human rights discourses in the MENA region. The 1970s have been considered the starting point of international human rights norm diffusion that led to the post-Cold War mushrooming of human rights activism.⁵ In this connection, the rise of Arab human rights NGOs in the 1970s and 1980s has been viewed as the work of disillusioned nationalists, socialists, and liberals. This view was neatly summarized by Fateh Azzam:

The idea that the aspirations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [could] become accountable legal obligations through the two international covenants that had just come into force in 1977 offered an exciting new avenue to be embraced. A new self-identification, and profession, [the] human rights activist, was born.⁶

Other scholars dealt with the emergence of human rights as the outcome of political tactics with a moral component that met international support, or a process comprising diverse and complex debates.⁷

Through a case study in Tunisia, this article describes how exploration of human rights as a concept with multiple meanings more fully captures processes that brought human rights to the fore in the MENA region. It describes the attitudes of Tunisian Maoist activists in the 1970s and early 1980s after the release from prison of leaders of the activists, many of whom later became known as prominent human rights defenders. It explores their fluctuations between one type of universalizing ideology, a Maoist-inspired version of Marxism-Leninism, and another grounded in human rights. I argue that the ideological changes caused by left-wing encounters with human rights was not the result of paradigmatic ideological shifts, or the demise of socialist, anti-imperialist thinking, nor a matter of international norm diffusion, but that this evolution was rooted in notions of international solidarity and in revisions or hybrid versions of prevailing historical materialist thinking.

Tunisia is a relevant case study of this period because it was the home country to the first autonomous human rights organization in the postcolonial Arab World, the Tunisian Human Rights League (al-Rabita al-Tunisiyya li-l-Dafa'i 'an Huquq al-Insan; the Ligue tunisienne des droits humains, or LTDH) initiated in 1977 by a group of reform-oriented, liberal top

³ Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 8; Jan Eckel, “The Rebirth of Politics from the Spirit of Morality: Explaining the Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s,” in Eckel and Moyn, *Breakthrough*, 228.

⁴ Glendon Sluga, “René Cassin: Les Droits de l’Homme and the Universality of Human Rights, 1945–1966,” in Hoffman, *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, 107–25; Samuel Moyn, “The Return of the Prodigal: The 1970s as a Turning Point in Human Rights History,” in Eckel and Moyn, *Breakthrough*, 7; David Copello, “The ‘Invention’ of Human Rights as a Revolutionary Concept: Confronting Orthodox Marxism and the New Left (Argentina, 1972).” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 3 (2021): 309, 314.

⁵ Jill Crystal, “The Human Rights Movement in the Arab World,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 16 (1994): 435–54; Sieglinde Gränzer, “Changing Discourse: Transnational Advocacy Networks in Tunisia and Morocco,” in *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, ed. Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 109–33; Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, “Human Rights in the Arab World: A Regional Perspective,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2001): 435–54; Anthony Tirado Chase, *Human Rights, Revolution and Reform in the Arab World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012).

⁶ Fateh Azzam, “Reflections on the Three Decades of Human Rights Work in the Arab Region,” in *Routledge Handbook on Human Rights and the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Anthony Tirado Chase (New York: Routledge, 2017), 463.

⁷ Kevin Dwyer, *Arab Voices: The Human Rights Debate in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1991); Susan Waltz, *Human Rights and Reform: Changing the Face of North African Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 14–15.

politicians.⁸ Tunisia was also the birthplace of the first Amnesty International section in the Arab world, established in 1980 upon the initiative of (mainly) former Maoists.

This article is based on one year of fieldwork in Tunisia and Paris, spent exploring the history of Tunisian human rights activism from the early 1960s to the revolution in 2011. This comprised interviews with eighty key human rights actors, including former Maoists, several of whom were incarcerated following political trials in the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition, it is based on archival studies and a collection of unpublished private and organizational files. I pay particular attention to the left's encounter with LTDH until 1982, the activists' contribution to the establishment of an Amnesty International Tunisia section in 1980, and the political reorganization of the left after the release of the political prisoners in 1980.

My analytic approach is inspired by Michael Freeden's work on political ideologies. He considers these as patterns of concepts built from a pool of indeterminate and unlimited combinations.⁹ In his view, political and ideological concepts in themselves are nonspecific, flexible, and contestable, while their meanings become "decontested," or clarified, by means of their relational association with adjacent, or peripheral concepts. Freeden has likened ideologies to furnished rooms containing a table, the sense or use of which is given by the other units in the room: chairs, lights, mirrors, paintings, and their interlocking vis-à-vis the center.¹⁰

Luc Boltanski's work is also relevant when seeking to understand the relation between human rights and Marxism-Leninism in the 1970s. Boltanski describes how universalizing ideologies can be built on relatively stable accusatory models of interconnected elements. These consist of "victims," "indicters," "perpetrators," "judges," and "universalizing principles" against which justice and a just society are assessed.¹¹

As I will demonstrate, the Tunisian activists' versions of Maoism and Marxism-Leninism correlated well with the accusatory model, as their "ideological room" was "furnished" with the following concepts: (a) the proletariat or the masses (victims); (b) the vanguard revolutionaries (indicters); (c) the bourgeois state, capitalism, imperialism or Soviet "social imperialism" (perpetrators); (d) scientific historical materialism or the teleological course of history based on class struggles (judges); and (e) a classless society free of exploitation (universalizing principles against which justice was measured).

In the late 1970s, doubts or loss of faith in some or all parts of the Marxist-Leninist accusatory model, or in the organization that kept it alive, led to a diversity of ideological transformations for multiple reasons, including changes on the Tunisian national political scene and new winds blowing in international politics. Some activists shifted from one universalizing worldview to another. Others transformed their political views in hybrid manners, relying on Marxist modes of reasoning. Still others did not change their worldview but merely adapted their activism and their organization to new political environments.

Drawing on interviews with former members of the Tunisian Maoist organization, Amel Tounsi (al-ʿAmil al-Tunsi, or AT; the Tunisian Worker) and founders of the LTDH, the first part of this article outlines the political and ideological environment from which AT stemmed and in which it operated.¹² It also describes how a group for solidarity with

⁸ Although I translate the names of organizations into English, I use French acronyms because these are best known in the Tunisian context. Some names of persons are written with French transliterations used in Tunisia.

⁹ Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

¹¹ Luc Boltanski, *La Souffrance à Distance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 288–89.

¹² Interviews with, from the AT: Hechmi Ben Frej, the late Tarek Ben Hiba, the late Sadok Ben Mhenni, Nejib Chebbi, Taher Chegrouche, Frej Fenniche, Mohamed Chérif Ferjani, Raoudha Gharbi, Hama Hammami, Nouredine Hmila, Ahmed Karaoud, Mohammed Khenissi, Aziz Krichen, Habib Marsit, Omar Mestiri, Sihem Ben Sedrine, and Mustapha Tlili. About the LTDH, interviewees included Taher Belkhodja, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, and Hamouda Ben Slama.

political prisoners was formed by AT in the 1970s. Later in the article, I explore the encounter of AT members with LTDH and their adoption of human rights.¹³

The Political and Ideological Environment: The 1960s in Tunisia

The left-wing Tunisian opposition movement discussed in this article grew out of the increasingly authoritarian environment of early postindependence Tunisia. The tight control of the ruling single party, the Socialist Destour Party (al-Hizb al-Ishtiraki al-Dusturi; Parti Socialiste Destourien, or PSD) over the national student union (al-Ittihad al-‘Amm li-Talabat Tunis; Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie, or UGET) led in 1963 to the creation of the organized oppositional group called the Socialist Study and Action Group for a Better Tunisia (Groupe d’Etudes et d’Action Socialiste pour une meilleure Tunisie, or GEAST). GEAST struggled for the autonomy of UGET from the ruling party and for elective democracy inside the union. Organized around the journal *Perspectives*, the first statements of the group denounced the attacks “on the little democracy left in the country,” adding that “only broad democracy gives the popular masses the chance to express their opinions and to freely defend their political, economic and social claims.”¹⁴ The group protested the regime’s oppression of the Tunisian masses, the arbitrary rule of president Habib Bourguiba (r. 1957–87), and the opposition being denied an active role in the construction of the new independent nation by the PSD.

In 1964, the leadership of the group moved from Paris to Tunis where the number of university students was growing exponentially because of the regime’s modernization policy and heavy investment in education.¹⁵ Here it attracted a growing number of students.

There are not sufficient data available to draw a conclusive socioeconomic profile of the leftist activists. My own interview data, however, and those of Michaël Béchir Ayari’s inquiry into social origins of leftist and Islamist activists, in the 1960s–70s and the 1980s respectively, indicate that there was a preponderance of individuals with higher-class origin among the activists in the 1960s. This ratio diminished with the expansion, and thereby democratization, of Tunisia’s educational system in the 1970s.¹⁶ This implies that what the Tunisian leftists had in common was being the product of the expanding higher educational system of the postcolonial state. The formation of a new left-wing political opposition and its later development could be seen as “a reaction of the country’s emerging intellectual elite to being excluded from defining Tunisia’s independent future.”¹⁷

In fact, entering the world of university and student politics was described by former students as a life-changing experience, opening access to spaces for internationalist, political, and intellectual free thinking and giving ideological shape to their quest to influence public affairs. As some of my informants put it:

When arriving at the university auditoriums [were] full of students who spoke out freely and talked about liberation and emancipation, about Freud, Reich, and of course

¹³ Feminist groups, migrant worker organizations, and other left-wing groups that stemmed from the same period will not be addressed in this article.

¹⁴ Anonymous, “Motion” (Union Générale des Étudiants Tunisiens, Section Paris), 1963, Fonds Othmani Ahmed et Lellouche Simone, La Contemporaine, Nanterre, France (hereafter Othmani-Lellouche archive), ARCH0105 Box 16.

¹⁵ Taoufiq Monastiri, “Chronique Sociale et Culturelle Tunisie,” *Annuaire de l’Afrique Du Nord* 10 (1971; Paris, CNRS, 1972).

¹⁶ Michaël Béchir Ayari, “S’engager en régime autoritaire. Gauchistes et islamistes dans la Tunisie indépendante” (Thèse de doctorat en science politique, Université Paul Cézanne, Aix-en-Provence, France, 2009); Michaël Béchir Ayari, *Le prix de l’engagement politique dans la Tunisie autoritaire: gauchistes et islamistes sous Bourguiba et Ben Ali (1957–2011)* (Paris: Karthala, 2016).

¹⁷ Idriss Jebari, “‘Illegitimate Children,’ the Tunisian New Left and the Student Question, 1963–1975,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (2022): 3.

about Marxism at that time. I therefore started reading and found an explanation to all the oppression I, myself, had experienced.¹⁸

We had a scholarship worth the salary of a primary school teacher if not more . . . it was in that period we read all that was published by Maspéro [publisher of left-wing classics in booklet form], we read *Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, and after that we read [Maoist] *La Cause* and the bulletin of the Chinese communist party.¹⁹

The university was an alternative space where there was a freedom of organization, of expression . . . there were pamphlets, initiatives, demonstrations, meetings . . . we felt we had to redo the world, that we had an obligation to remake the world.²⁰

New modes of social interaction emerged, diverging from the milieu of the patriarchal families in which many were raised. Students came to share Marxist, Maoist, and anti-imperialist universalizing ideologies with fellow students elsewhere in the world, arousing feelings of being the member of a like-minded global community.²¹

Initially GEAST served as a platform for different Marxist and socialist currents. The group led anti-imperialist demonstrations against US involvement in Vietnam and protested against the 1967 Six Day War, the arrests of student leaders, and so forth. These actions peaked during demonstrations and university strikes in March 1968, leading to mass arrests, torture, and political trials against the leadership of the group.²²

One year earlier the impact of the cultural revolution in China had become visible in the writings of *Perspectives*. In 1967 the journal published two notes by the Chinese embassy addressing the Tunisian government and criticizing censorship of the embassy's information activities, Tunisian cooperation with Taiwan, and Tunisia's abstention in UN votes on China's permanent membership of the security council.²³

A third issue introduced Mao's cultural revolution to the readership and the need for a continued revolution and readjustments of contradictions between superstructure and infrastructure.²⁴ In summer 1967, a delegation of three GEAST Paris members went to China on a

¹⁸ Author interview with AT section leader, later an ordinary member of AI and LTDH, 20 March 2021, Hammamet, Tunisia. All those quoted in this article remain anonymous to underscore that the recorded interviews are placed in a context chosen by the author and not the interviewees.

¹⁹ AT member, later cofounder of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (al-Jam'iyā al-Tunisiya li-l-Nissa' al-Dimuqratiya; Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates or ATFD), 21 December 2021, Tunis.

²⁰ Author interview with AT member, later LTDH member and cofounder of the National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia (al-Majlis al-Watani li-l-Hurriya bi-Tunis; Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie or CNLT), 5 February 2020, Tunis.

²¹ Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett, eds., *The Third World in the Global Sixties* (Oxford, UK: Bergan, 2012), 1–20; Martin Klimke and Mary Nolan, "Introduction: The Globalization of the Sixties," in *Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building*, ed. Chen Jian et al. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 1–9; Aziz Krichen, "68 Comme Insurrection Mondiale de La Jeunesse," in *Soixante-Huit en Tunisie: Le Mythe et Le Patrimoine*, ed. Hishem Abdessamad (Tunis: Mots Passants, 2019), 99–111.

²² For the early history of *Perspectives*, see Abdeljelil Temimi, *al-Dawr al-Siyyasi wa-l-Thaqafi li-Birsiktif wa-l-Birsiktifiyyin fi Tunis al-Mustaqilla* (Tunis: Fondation Temimi pour la Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2008); Burleigh Hendrickson, "March 68: Practicing Transnational Activism from Tunis to Paris," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 4 (2012): 755–74; Ayari, *Le prix de l'engagement*; Abdeljalil Bougera, *Fusul min Tarikh al-Yasar al-Tunisi* (Tunis: Perspectives édition, 2019).

²³ See Anonymous, "Dieu, comme les chinois sont méchants," *Perspectives*, 12 (1967): 10; Anonymous, "Diplomatie des poids et des mesures," *Perspectives*, 15 (1967): 20. Idriss Jebari incorrectly dates the shift to Maoism of GEAST members to 1964–65; "Illegitimate Children," 7. The fact that the decisive organizational turn to Maoism happened in 1967 was confirmed to me during my interviews with Hechim Ben Frej, who took part in the first trip to China, and with three *Perspectives* members in the 1960s, Khémaïs Chammari, Françoise Valensi, and Hasan Ouardani. On this period see also Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, "Noureddine Ben Kheder: Entretien" [Noureddine Ben Kheder: Interview], in *Habib Bourguiba: La trace et l'héritage*, ed. Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser (Paris: Karthala, 2004), 533–49; Gilbert Naccache, *Qu'a tu fait de ta jeunesse? Itinéraire d'un opposant au régime de Bourguiba* (Tunis: CERF, 2009); Mohamed Charfi (Tunis: Elyzad, 2015).

²⁴ See Anonymous, "La révolution culturelle chinoise: un phénomène éminemment révolutionnaire," *Perspectives* 13 (1967): 17–18.

Chinese-sponsored tour of the country, and in autumn 1967 another delegation from inside Tunisia followed suit. Around this time a majority faction reorganized the hierarchy of the group and opted for an open and confrontational attitude toward the regime, calling for the creation of a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party with slogans such as “Let us Unite to Destroy the Reactionaries” and “The Imperialists and the Reactionaries Are But Paper Tigers,” leading to the first of several political fractures within the group.²⁵

The arrests and trial led to the creation of a group for solidarity with the prisoners, the International Committee for the Safeguard of Human Rights in Tunisia (Comité international pour la sauvegarde des droits de l’homme en Tunisie, or CISDHT). CISDHT has been viewed as the starting point for human rights activism in Tunisia. However, despite its name, international human rights standards were not a core concern of the group.²⁶ When all prisoners were released in early 1970 due to a presidential pardon following a major political and economic crisis that ended the 1960s socialist agricultural and trade cooperatives, CISDHT ceased most of its activities. It was replaced by a Committee for Information and Defense of Victims of Repression (Le comité d’information et de défense des victimes de la répression en Tunisie, or CIDVRT) whose work I will describe.

The 1970s: Revolutionary and Democratic Work

Several political crises followed the ending of the 1960s cooperatives by the Tunisian regime.²⁷ In 1971, the PSD organized a reform congress in which a majority of delegates agreed that the decision-making bodies should no longer be appointed top-down but instead by democratic elections. However, the decision was repealed by President Bourguiba, forcing high-ranking “liberal” PSD members, who later became the initiators of the LTDH, to withdraw from the party. The same year, the congress of UGET ended with the forced removal of the opposition students by the police. An extraordinary general assembly organized six months later, and was again stormed by police, who arrested hundreds of left-wing students.

The GEAST group was the leading force behind the extraordinary general assembly, and of the student movement overall. In this period, it became known as Amel Tounsi (al-‘Amal al-Tounsi, or AT; the Tunisian Worker), after the new name of the journal formerly known as *Perspectives*.

Amel Tounsi in the 1970s

We thought there would be . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat led by the party of the proletariat that we obviously represented. There would be this temporary phase after which there would be no need to struggle because we were going to ensure equality between us. The individual would be dissolved in society and set free without losing itself. This was attractive and I can tell you that I still have this dream: a society

²⁵ See *Perspectives* 17 (1968), 12–13.

²⁶ See in particular Burleigh Hendrickson, “March 68,” 755–74; Burleigh Hendrickson, “Student Activism and the Birth of the Tunisian Human Rights Movement, 1968–1978,” in *Étudiants Africains en Mouvement: Contribution à une Histoire des Années 1968*, ed. Françoise Blum, Pierre Guidi, and Ophélie Rillon (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 2017), 235–49. I have argued elsewhere that the group, when using human rights in court, was concerned with constitutional law and not international human rights law. In the public sphere, the group sought to raise awareness of the humanitarian situation of the prisoners and not of international human rights principles; see Marc Schade-Poulsen, “Meanings of the Human Rights Concept: Tunisian Activism in the 1970s,” *Journal of Human Rights* 2023: 1–18.

²⁷ Werner Ruf, “Le Socialisme Tunisien: Conséquences d’une Expérience Avortée,” in *Introduction à l’Afrique Du Nord Contemporaine*, ed. Mohamed Chérif, Horst Mensching, and Werner Ruf (Paris: CNRS, 1975), 399–411; Eva Bellin, “Civil Society Emergent? State and Social Class in Tunisia” (PhD diss., University of Princeton, 1993); Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le Syndrome Autoritaire: Politique En Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).

where there will be both equality and emancipation of the individual and where the individual will not disappear. A classless society, imagine! Where each of us can do what he wants without having to account for his doings; where there is no pressure, no police, no superior, where we will have to manage the organization in turns. . . . we were hungry for absolute justice, absolute equality, even love would be lived differently, today I call it Paradise.²⁸

Due to its activities, AT was heavily repressed throughout the 1970s, and members were brutally tortured by police seeking to unravel the organization. In 1974, Bourguiba withdrew his pardon of first-generation GEAST leaders and sent them back to jail to serve long-term sentences. The largest trials against AT took place in 1974, the so-called trial of the 202, and in 1975, the trial of the 101. At that time most AT leaders were in jail, which diminished the group's organizational capacity and role at the university.

Already in mid-1967, the group had established a clandestine top-down pyramidal structure with hierarchal chains of command that ended internal the face-to-face debates that had characterized the early days of the organization. Members received training in clandestine work and ascetic life. Apart from studying Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Stalin, they read *What Every Revolutionary Should Know About Repression* by Victor Serge, a former companion of Trotsky and Lenin, explaining how to avoid tailing and infiltration. They studied Duc Thuan's *L'Indomptable* about experiences from the French Poulo Condo prison in Vietnam, to prepare the activists for torture and prison life. They read Italian communist Maria-Antoinetta Macchiocci's travel book about the cultural revolution in China.²⁹ Increased Arabization of the educational system enabled the younger members to become acquainted with the works of Arab leftists such as George Habash, Ghassan Kanafani, and Kamal Nasser.³⁰

In 1974, a group of fifteen activists went to the PLFP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) training camps in the Beqaa Valley in south Lebanon. At that time, members of the group were increasingly ready to establish storage points for weapons inside Tunisia in preparation for the revolution. However, these plans remained in drawers, and arms were never used in practice.³¹

The political analyses of AT activists were grounded in historical materialism. Accordingly, the driving forces of history were fueled by class contradictions, and history pointed inevitably toward the dictatorship of the proletariat, or a proletarian democracy, that would lead the masses to a classless society free of exploitation. In a Maoist version this would happen through repeated cultural revolutions, ensuring alignment of the superstructure with the forces of production. However, the group diverged in its analysis about which stage in the historical materialist progression Tunisia was undergoing and about the tactics and strategy that followed from this analysis, for example when to use "agitation" (*al-tahrīd*) or rely on "propaganda" (*di'āiyya*).³²

One faction suggested that Tunisia was dominated by imperialism, a comprador bourgeoisie, and an agrarian bourgeoisie of large landowners. The upcoming revolution would therefore be a democratic, national struggle against imperialism and for national independence. It

²⁸ Author interview with AT member, later member of LTDH, 3 May 2018, Tunis.

²⁹ Victor Serge, *Ce Que Tout Révolutionnaire Doit Savoir de La Répression* (Paris: Maspéro, 1970); Duc Thuan, *L'Indomptable* (Hanoi: Edition L.A., 1970); Maria-Antoinetta Macchiocci, *De La Chine* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

³⁰ See Fethi Bel Haj Yahia, *La Gammelle et Le Couffin* (Tunis: Mots Passants, 1970), 161.

³¹ The exception is one incident in which a pistol was shot in self-defense at policemen by an AT member who feared arrest. This act was condemned by the most members of AT. Jebari, in "Illegitimate Children" (22), suggests that the group had arms hidden inside Tunisia. My interviews did not confirm this information; see also Bel Haj Yahia, *La Gammelle et le Couffin*, 92.

³² Apart from issues of the journals *Perspectives* and *al-Amil al-Tunsi*, this section is based on *Groupes d'études et d'action socialiste, Stratégie et tactiques. Débats inédit 1970-1972* (Tunis: Dar Bayram, Outrouhat, 1989); and Aziz Krichen, *La gauche et son grand récit* (Tunis: Mots Passants, 2019).

would be a struggle of the broader masses for agrarian reforms and democratic freedoms. Another strand argued that the national struggle in Tunisia was over, and that imperialism no longer had its hold on the state apparatus. Tunisia's independence had enabled the bourgeoisie to assert its power and destroyed feudalism, causing the main contradiction to become that between the bourgeois state and the proletariat. Therefore, the next revolution would be socialist, leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, from a tactical point of view democratic work remained relevant since a weak bourgeoisie, still indirectly dominated by international capital, had developed fascist modes of control of means of expression, association, and assembly.

However, in both versions, there was an implicit consensus inspired by Lenin about the need to create a "junction" (*iltihām*) between the intellectuals and the proletariat as well as to establish a vanguard party of intellectuals and workers to lead the masses.³³ Imperialism and Soviet "social imperialism" were the main enemy, and the Palestinian struggle was a leading revolutionary force in the Arab world. Both versions considered the national trade union leadership and the "liberal" former PSD members, mentioned above, part of the ruling class. Both versions were furthermore examples of the accusatory model described in the introduction; however, importantly, they also, for tactical or strategic reasons, acknowledged the need to engage in democratic work and to struggle for public freedoms.³⁴ This entailed promoting internal democracy and autonomy from the ruling party when engaging in student and trade union activities. Likewise, it included engaging in solidarity work with political prisoners.

Democratic Work

In 1973, AT activists established the Tunisian Committee for Information and Defense of Victims of Repression (CIDVRT) in Paris in solidarity with imprisoned group members. The first CIDVRT bulletin defined its aim as raising the public's awareness about the prisoners' humanitarian situation, calling for a general amnesty, and denouncing the antidemocratic and fascist character of the Tunisian regime. The organization would promote humanitarian solidarity actions and, in this regard, take steps to mobilize different progressive, democratic, and revolutionary movements in the world. It also aimed to contact lawyers nationally and internationally to ensure the prisoners' defense.³⁵

Most committee members were AT members, but the CIDVRT was also composed of individuals who were described as "democrats," relatives and friends of the political prisoners and opponents of the regime. From 1972 to the release of the prisoners in 1980, the CIDVRT regularly published news bulletins about worker strikes, peasant protests, and student demonstrations, as well as accounts of torture methods used by the regime (Figs. 1 and 2). It reported on the prisoners' hunger strikes and lawyers attending the political trials. It also established connections with international human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, whose local groups of volunteers adopted most Tunisian political prisoners as prisoners of conscience.

The CIDVRT occasionally invoked human rights when addressing letters to authorities. For example, a letter about the deteriorating health conditions of the prisoners from the families of the prisoners to the president of the Tunisian Bar Association in 1975 asked

³³ Vladimir Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* Marxists.org, 1902, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/download/what-itd.pdf>.

³⁴ They could find theoretical support for this view in Vladimir Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder, Marxists.org, 1920, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc>; and Chinese Communist Party, "A Proposal Concerning the General Line of the International Communist Movement: The Letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in Reply to the Letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of March 30, 1963," Marxists.org, 1963, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sino-soviet-split/cpc/proposal.htm>.

³⁵ Le comité tunisien d'information et de défense des victimes de la répression, "Plateforme du Comité," 1972.

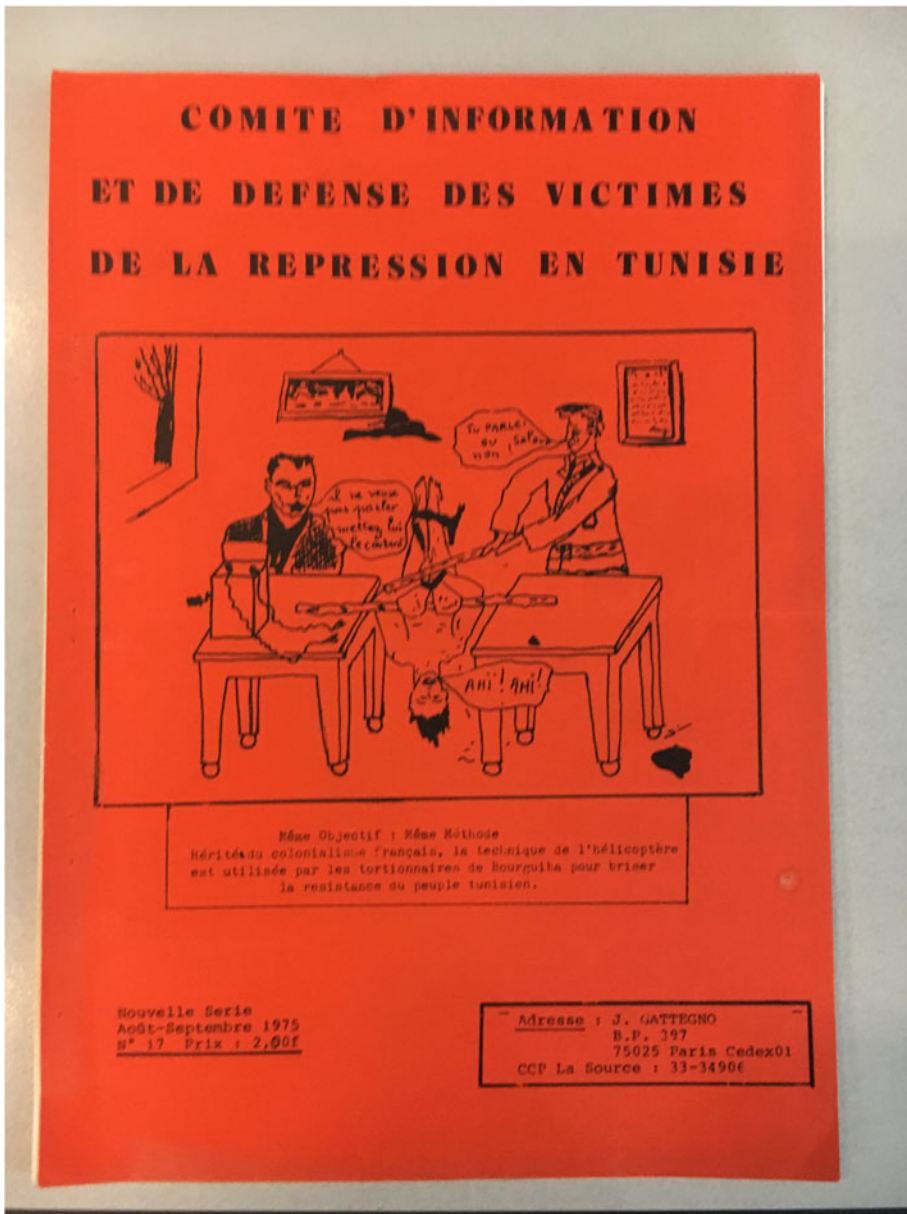


Figure 1. CIVDRT Bulletin, August/September 1975.

the president to “intervene to safeguard human rights.”³⁶ Nevertheless, the CIVDRT remained grounded in a Marxist-Leninist understanding of class struggle and of the political situation in Tunisia. Unlike the preceding group in solidarity with the 1968 prisoners, it omitted human rights from its name. The imprisonment of the activists and the violation of their fundamental freedoms were not discussed in terms of human rights, which were considered a bourgeois and imperialistic concept, but instead they spoke of class oppression and the regime’s failed political and economic policies.

³⁶ Lettre adressée par un groupe de parents des prisonniers politiques au batonnier des avocats de Tunis, *Bulletin du comité d'information et de défense des victimes de la répression en Tunisie*, 1975.



Figure 2. CIVDRT Bulletin, May 1976.

Nonetheless, the democratic work included the denunciation of political trials, torture, and lack of political freedoms. These were also areas of concern for the dissident liberal group that had left the PSD after the 1971 congress, and who took the initiative to establish LTDH in pursuit of autonomous political spaces.³⁷

³⁷ Hendrickson, in "Student Activism" (246), describes LTDH as a united human rights front of different political strands and suggests that there was a direct connection between the GEAST group and the league. However, the liberals had no organic links with former members of GEAST in the early days of the LTDH.

The Turn to Human Rights: Establishment of the LTDH

The members of the “liberal group” originated from the Tunisian bourgeoisie, and several had held high positions within the state apparatus in the 1960s, including its repressive parts. Among these were Ahmed Mestiri, an early member of Bourguiba’s political entourage and former minister of defense; Hassib Ben Ammar, former mayor of Tunis and minister of defense after Mestiri; Radhia Haddad, Ben Ammar’s sister and former president of the National Union of Tunisian Women (al-Ittihad al al-Watani li-l-Mar ʿa al-Tunisiya; l’Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes or UNFT); Beji Caïd Essebsi, a former minister of interior; and Abdelhay Chouikha, former general secretary of UGET and nephew of Mongi Slim, another close collaborator of Bourguiba and 1961 president of the UN General Assembly. After their withdrawal or exclusion from the PSD, the liberals, who were conspicuously anti-Marxists, initiated a series of private meetings for discussion of the situation in the country and internationally, and how to open the political space to regain political weight. In March 1976, the group issued a founding statement calling for more freedoms and democracy in the country.³⁸

In the same period, social and political tensions in the country were on the rise. An open-door economic policy was initiated in 1972, paired with a large influx of university students to the national trade union (al-Ittihad al-ʿAmm al-Tunisi li-l-Shughl; Union Tunisienne Générale du Travail, or UGTT), led to demands for higher wages and better working conditions. It also intensified actions in favor of internal democracy within the UGTT and for its autonomy vis-à-vis the party. Meanwhile, Bourguiba’s deteriorating mental health led to intense power struggles at the top of the political system between hard-liners, such as Prime Minister Hedi Nourira and PSD director Mohamed Sayah, and a group who felt it necessary to soften the regime’s authoritarianism to diminish political tensions in the country. The latter was led by the president’s wife, Wassila Bourguiba, and minister of the interior, Tahar Belkhodja, both of whom maintained close relations with the liberal group, considered potential allies in the power struggle.³⁹

The tensions led to the withdrawal from the party top of UGTT leader Habib Achour, siding with Wassila Bourguiba, and to a general strike on Black Thursday, 26 January 1978. The strike was repressed by the army and PSD militias and resulted in hundreds of deaths, the imprisonment of the trade union leadership, and their replacement by a regime of appointed figures. Two years later, Tunisian armed groups, supported by Libya and Algeria, attempted an armed uprising in the Southern mining town of Gafsa that failed. These developments led to a relative opening of the political system and, in the early 1980s, to the release of all left-wing activists from prison.

It was in these years of political turmoil but also of political opportunities that the liberals began navigating. In spring 1977, they published an appeal calling for the “respect of the rights that was solemnly declared to be guaranteed by the Constitution and the UDHR [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights] to which Tunisia adhered after independence” and announced they would hold a National Conference on Public Freedoms.⁴⁰ The conference was banned, but following advocacy trips to London, France, and US President Jimmy Carter’s pro-human rights administration in Washington, DC, the liberals reached a compromise with the Ministry of the Interior, establishing a Tunisian Human Rights League with twenty-two board members, including members of the ruling party. Later the same year, the regime authorized the publication of a weekly newspaper *Er Raï* (al-Rʿai; The Opinion), directed by Hassib Ben Ammar, and in June 1978 part of the liberal group under the leadership of Ahmed Mestiri announced the creation of a political party, the Social

³⁸ Les Mestiristes, “Déclaration Des Mestiristes,” 1976, Othmani-Lellouche archive, ARCH0105_27.

³⁹ On the role played by Wassila Bourguiba in Tunisian politics, see Nouredine Dougui, *Wassila Bourguiba: La main invisible* (Tunis: Éditions Sud, 2020).

⁴⁰ Conseil national pour les libertés, “Déclaration de Presse,” 1977, Othmani-Lellouche archive, ARCH0105_27.

Democratic Movement (Haraka al-Dimuqratiyyin al-Ishtirakiyyin; Mouvement Democrate Socialiste, or MDS), which would be officially approved in 1983.

As mentioned by Susan Waltz, the initial concerns of the liberals were not so much with protecting human rights per se as with opening the political system and redressing the political and personal wrongs that followed the PSD's 1971 Monastir congress.⁴¹ In its first years of existence, the league was careful to not challenge President Bourguiba's authority. For example, in an interview with *Jeune Afrique* one month after the league's authorization, the LTDH president, Saadoun Zmerli, answered the question of how to deal with the carceral conditions of the political prisoners, saying "First we need to know the facts, we need information; then we will create a file upon which to act." To a question about ongoing violence at the university, he replied "Violence, whether public or private, requires analysis, one needs first to analyze the situation before suggesting solutions."⁴²

Between 1977 and 1982, protected by its official recognition, the league began establishing local sections in many parts of Tunisia under the close supervision of the MDS in-the-making. It furthermore visited the prisoners in Borj Roumi and organized a series of public meetings on the question of pretrial detention, torture, and the issue of a general amnesty for all prisoners.⁴³ League members attended political trials, issued reports, and released press statements about human rights violations. This enabled the introduction on the broader political scene of themes under the label of human rights that previously had been confined to the courts and the solidarity groups. It also triggered responses from left-wing activists.

Inside Prison

At the time when we were arrested, the American policy under Nixon was based on the fight against communist expansion. This policy translated into support for fascist dictatorships and the war against the Vietnamese people. It was a torturer who told me Saigon had fallen when we were taken to the political police. I said: "thank you for the good news" . . . and when we got out of prison, human rights had become an American priority. The fact that the Americans adopted human rights was disturbing for us, almost nightmarish, though the fact that Carter was replaced by Reagan made it easier. But Carter left traces. US State Department affairs became societal matters. Human rights became a policy and forced us to reflect.⁴⁴

In late 1976, the leaders of AT who had been arrested during different waves of police clamp-downs were all placed by the prison authorities in Borj Roumi. Several had never met outside prison, and they now had time to discuss the changing national and international political tides, evaluate their past political performances, and discuss organizational issues. Personal experiences of repression, the changes in the communist world, and the Black Thursday events had impacted the group. It was politically divided on questions such as the pertinence of Leninism and whether to adhere to the Chinese regime's policies after the fall of the Gang of Four that for some had come as a shock.

The debates also concerned reevaluations of strategic and tactical relations with the trade union leadership that before January 1978 had been considered a class enemy. Further discussions dealt with the liberals' human rights initiative and relations with the liberals per se.

⁴¹ Susan Waltz, *Human Rights and Reform: Changing the Face of North African Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 157.

⁴² Souhayr Belhassen, "Le droits aux libertés: un interview avec Saadoun Zmerli," *Jeune Afrique*, 10 June 1977, 26.

⁴³ The visit resulted in improvement of their detention conditions, free access to books, access to TV, and more frequent family visits; see Anonymous, "Compte Rendu," 1977, Othmani-Lellouche archive, ARCH0105_26.

⁴⁴ Author interview with AT section leader, later board member of LTDH, 9 March 2020, Tunis.

Some of these had been in command of the 1960s repression of the student movement and had been considered bourgeois class oppressors. In the following section I explore the main pathways taken by these reevaluations, keeping in mind that human beings rarely fit as neatly into analytical categories as researchers would like them to do.

Prison and Human Suffering

On 24 May 1977, five early leaders of GEAST, whose presidential pardon had been arbitrarily withdrawn, smuggled a letter out of prison addressed to the liberals, in which they agreed to add their names to the call for the national conference on public freedoms, while making a point of recalling the prominent role members of the liberal group had played in the repression of the 1960s. The letter stated, “We are convinced that democratic freedoms are the basic requirements for the people to exercise sovereignty and that confronting different political options can only be done in freedom.”⁴⁵ One of the signatories, Ahmed Othmani, had in the late 1960s and early 1970s been a Marxist-Leninist hard-liner who organized the recruitment and training of future AT leaders. After his release from prison in 1970, and before his rearrest in 1971, he led a secret section conducting “agitation” campaigns among workers and students in defiance of AT’s line during that period, which held that the time was not ripe for agitation but required propaganda. In 1979, he managed to smuggle a text out of prison that was published in the well-known French review *Les Temps Modernes*.⁴⁶ The narrative was one of few personal testimonies by Tunisian torture victims describing in detail the methods used against him. In the text Othmani made no reference to his Marxist-Leninist past. Instead, he depicted himself as a human being who, as a young man, believed in a better society and “morally and intellectually opposed the regime’s one-party rule.” He now called for “the respect of fundamental freedoms and human rights.”⁴⁷

Othmani did not describe his intellectual trajectory during imprisonment. However, in the Othmani-Lellouche archive, there is a twelve-page handwritten list of books he read in prison, among them the collected works of Lenin and Mao, but also Russian dissident literature, the French new philosophers, and classics of European literature.⁴⁸ In his memoirs, *Sortir de La Prison*, he related his conversations with prison guards and the paradox he felt when claiming rights and freedoms for himself while advocating for the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁴⁹ He also mentioned with dismay watching younger inmates listening at night with “religious fervor” to Communist Albania’s Radio Tirana.⁵⁰

Testimonies of younger prisoners provide glimpses of the effect torture and isolation could have on the prisoners:

I’ll tell you one thing: when you are tortured by the political police you face moments when you start thinking about the individual, about the human being. You have a torturer in front of you. A hitting machine . . . and you ask yourself, is this an animal, a human being, a machine? . . . I had a humanist background before becoming Marxist and I believed Marxism was a form for humanism; initially I studied existentialism, Sartre, Camus, and all that came to the surface . . . and I asked myself, why does Man act in this way?⁵¹

⁴⁵ Political detainees in the Prison of Nador, “Au Comité de l’Appel Pour a Défense Des Libertés Publics En Tunisie,” 24 May 1977, Othmani-Lellouche archive, ARCH0105_27.

⁴⁶ The review was founded by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merly-Ponty in 1945.

⁴⁷ Ahmed Othmani, “La Répression en Tunisie,” *Les Temps Modernes* (1979): 1663.

⁴⁸ Ahmed Othmani, “Bibliothèque de Borj Roumi,” n.d., Othmani-Lellouche archive, ARCH0105_28.

⁴⁹ Ahmed Othmani, *Sortir de La Prison: Un Combat Pour Réformer Les Systèmes Carcéraux Dans Le Monde* (Paris: Editions la découverte, 2002), 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵¹ Author interview with AT member, later LTDH board member, 27 February 2022, Tunis.

I remember the first torture session. We were prepared and we knew how the Vietnamese had resisted torture. I had Lenin's image in my mind, and it helped me overcome my weakness, my fear, and our failures . . . But once you are back in prison you are placed in individual cells, and that is when you ask yourself certain questions; what do we do? what have I done? where did we make mistakes? and the revolution, when will it happen? I started asking questions that hurt; and the bricks, the walls became mirrors reflecting my nudity. I wanted to escape, but wherever I looked, I found myself in front of a mirror.⁵²

Hannah Arendt has written that physical pain is the most intense feeling we know, the most private and least communicable kind of experience that can annul all other kinds of experiences.⁵³ During separate interviews, two former prisoners told me about their release from the torture chambers of the Ministry of the Interior, which happened to be located on perhaps the most lively street in Tunisia, the Bourguiba Avenue in the center of town:

When I left the Ministry, I started looking at the world in a new manner . . . it was in the month of May; people are dressed lightly; they have a good life; I looked at people's faces. They didn't suspect that in the same moment people nearby were suffering; I said to myself, that this is life. There are people suffering for the sake of other people, and these passers-by don't even know that you exist. I had never felt so lonely, and that is how I started reviewing my life.⁵⁴

For several of the activists, the experience of prison isolation and lone encounters with the self led to a break with their prior life as vanguard revolutionaries and the organizational structure that had sustained their ideological belief. It also meant being freed from the constraints of clandestine work, always being on guard, isolated from families and friends, and from "the masses" with whom they were supposed to create a "junction."

You live like a professional revolutionary twenty-four hours a day; and you live under very difficult circumstances, with very few means, even to eat. You start seeing the people around you, personalities being built, those who seek to become leaders, those who seek to take power . . . when I was arrested . . . I was questioning all my ideological beliefs with regard to Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, popular war or the long-term armed struggle . . . I saw that it did not really match the Tunisian situation . . . and little by little, by discussing with the first-generation leaders [in prison] I realized that the first revolution should be an intellectual, cultural one. First the people must be educated, we need to invest in writing, publishing, discussion clubs, teach people to express themselves, and we started talking about human rights.⁵⁵

It was in this context that Amnesty International came to play a role.

Amnesty International

During the 1970s most AT activists had been adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International local groups, which wrote letters to the regime and sought to remain in contact with the prisoners. As informants told me:

⁵² Author interview with AT section leader, later ordinary member of LTDH and AI Tunisia, 20 March 2021, Hammamet, Tunisia.

⁵³ Hannah Arendt, *Det Mennekkelige Villkår* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2008), 73.

⁵⁴ Author interview with AT member and later president of an LTDH section, 7 October 2019, Tunis.

⁵⁵ Author interview AT leader and later cofounder of AI, 7 October 2019, Tunis.

The first letter I received was from a couple in The Hague. I was alone in a cell, and a prison guard handed the letter over to me. It said that “We are Mr. and Ms. Japson. We are informed about your situation; we are in solidarity with you.” No more. The Hague, Amnesty International. . . . It was something special for me because I had just come out of several months’ isolation. . . . After that I received one or two letters from the same couple with a sweater, while others received clothes from Denmark and Sweden. . . . It showed that there were others than the lawyers, the families, the journalists, the committees, there was also solidarity from groups and persons that we didn’t know. This was fantastic; small gestures, chocolate, sweaters; it made you reflect.⁵⁶

Amnesty International was also something that contributed to my intellectual development. When you see people . . . sending clothes, helping out with money, forwarding letters . . . people that you don’t know, that are neither Marxist nor Leninist, nothing at all, and who have a sense of solidarity, then you start . . . because until then human rights were bourgeois rights; in the same way that democracy was a bourgeois democracy that was instrumentalized . . . these people contact you although they don’t need to do so, they come to you voluntarily from all sides of the ideological spectrum; what is that? It contributed a bit to my breaking out of my ideological straitjacket and putting the human being at the center.⁵⁷

AI had been founded in London in 1961, to bear “witness to the private suffering of nonviolent innocents, to demand their release on the sole ground that such suffering was unjust.”⁵⁸ It only adopted prisoners of conscience who did not advocate the use of violence and were considered “forgotten victims of intolerance and of man’s inhumanity to man.”⁵⁹ The early AI secretariat collected and collated prisoner cases and forwarded the material to groups who raised relief money that was transferred to relatives of the prisoner or sent sample letters to the relevant authorities asking for the prisoners’ whereabouts or for their release.

In 1968, the organization adopted statutes that restricted its work to four articles of the UDHR, related to torture; to arbitrary arrest and detention; to freedom of thought, of conscience and religion; and to freedom of opinion and expression. It had also adopted the principle that no Amnesty group could work on cases within its own country except on the question of the death penalty and human rights education. Therefore, AI’s mandate at that time matched that of the Tunisian solidarity groups assisting political prisoners suffering from a dire humanitarian situation. Its activity was a continuation of the early student days of internationalism:

We were mainly on Amnesty’s side due to the international solidarity aspect—how does one express one’s internationalist dimension if not by supporting the struggle of people elsewhere than at home? When the boys left the prison, they had resolved the problem and taken a stand. It was not contradictory with our revolutionary project. Human rights are part of our revolutionary journey so I agreed with them to create the Tunisian section.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Author interview with section leader of AT, later cofounder of AI Tunisia and LTDH member, 19 November 2019, La Marsa, Tunisia.

⁵⁷ Author interview with AT leader, later cofounder of AI, 3 April 2020, Jendouba, Tunisia.

⁵⁸ Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 62.

⁵⁹ Séan McBride, “Introduction,” in *Annual Report 1968–1969* (London: Amnesty International, 1969), 7. Quoting Robert Burns’s poem: “And Man whose heav’n-erected face / The smiles of love adorn / Man’s inhumanity to Man / Makes countless thousands mourn!” Robert Burns, “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge,” 1784, <https://www.robertburns.org/works/55.shtml>.

⁶⁰ Author interview with regular AT member; cofounder and later president of AI Tunisia, 1 December 2021, Tunis.

All the same, we were indebted. This system where I support detainees in other countries, activists elsewhere, and those activists support Tunisian activists that are victims of repression; I thought it as very good, this completely selfless way of functioning; we trusted Amnesty helping us to support people we did not know.⁶¹

After his release Othmani was one of the initiators of the Amnesty International Tunisia Section (AI-T), together with a group of about thirty people, mostly former prisoners or relatives of these, wishing to repay the solidarity they themselves had experienced and gratefully acknowledging AI's support.⁶² Othmani himself became an Amnesty International London staff and international board member, also founding the international nongovernmental organization, Penal Reform International, in 1989.

Formerly having expressed solidarity with the oppressed of the world, AI-T founders now acted in solidarity with those suffering according to an accusatory model. The former vanguard revolutionaries became human rights activists (indicters), denouncing state arbitrariness and repression (the perpetrators), in front of public opinion (the judges), while justice was measured against the four articles of the UDHR ("universalizing principles").

AI-T was not granted legal status until 1989, and to protect the association the former prisoners chose not to sit in the board, because they were monitored by the police. Although they became active in letter-writing Amnesty groups, many members of the group abandoned party politics all together.

Reorganizing the Left and Human Rights

Not all prisoners broke with their organizational past during their time in prison. Younger activists recreated organizational group dynamics inside prison, setting up study circles, pursuing ideological debates on items such as the Chinese-Albania discord, the Chinese government's new Three Worlds theory, and future actions to be taken:

We transformed the prison into a faculty. There were language courses, constant training. We were always discussing politics. There were constantly general assemblies where we discussed and analyzed. Before organizing a hunger strike, we started by analyzing the international situation. You didn't start with Tunisia, you started with [the situation] in Saigon [laughing].⁶³

The letter of support to the liberals was not the only one smuggled out of prison. In June 1977, a group of prisoners wrote that they welcomed the fact that the call for a national conference on public freedoms included several democratic, political demands. They recalled that their imprisonment, torture, and arbitrary sentences were powerful proofs of the violation of fundamental rights but refused to support the call for the conference:

We are struggling for the implementation of all the democratic rights that are included in the Constitution and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but we consider it bourgeois demagoguery and mystification of the masses to say that the implementation of these texts guarantees the sovereignty of the Tunisians. On the contrary, everything that results from its implementation will only be a simple modification of the modes of domination by the bourgeoisie of the Tunisian society. Popular sovereignty will

⁶¹ Author interview with AT relative and later cofounder of ATFD, 6 December 2021, Tunis.

⁶² See also Sandrine Robert, "S'engager Pour Les Droits Humains En Tunisie" (Mémoire de DES; Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2004), 61.

⁶³ Author interview with ordinary AT member, later member of the Committee for the Respect of Freedoms and Human Rights in Tunisia (Comité pour le respect des libertés et des droits de l'homme en Tunisie, or CRLDHT), 12 December 2018, Paris.

first be established when the people's power is institutionalized, the power of the popular classes based on a fundamental alliance of workers and peasants under the leadership of the working class.⁶⁴

However, those drafting the letter did not manage to obtain approval from the whole group. A handwritten comment on the letter, which I found in the Othmani-Lellouche archive, notes that seven voted for the letter, seven were against, and two abstained.

The activists were politically divided, and several had lost faith in some or several, but not all, elements of their Marxist-Leninist ideology. The main fracture line lay between those arguing for the rebuilding of a clandestine vanguard party and those who opted for acting openly. The former sided with Albania's criticism of China after Deng Xiao Peng's rise to power in December 1978; the latter disregarded both the Albanian and Chinese positions. Finally, there were those who adhered to the official Chinese policy. I will here focus on the first two and most impactful groups.

Out of Prison

After Black Thursday some of us started revising our relationship with the trade union, the mass movement, and the struggle for trade union freedoms; we knew that the committees for the defense of prisoners, Amnesty and others acted in solidarity with us. On a personal level, it gave me some answers to questions I asked myself . . . Freedom was important but I couldn't see how this related to the dictatorship of the proletariat; I began more and more to reject this idea as well as that of the single party . . . in the same period, I read *The Gulag Archipelago*, and about the experience in Eastern Europe, and these readings provided me with personal elements to criticize this dictatorship of the proletariat in relation to the political situation in Tunisia.⁶⁵

Should it be a pluralist system, or should we opt for a Stalinist concept? After the failure of the cultural revolution in China, we believed socialism could not survive without pluralism; that the working class was diverse, that it should not be a kind of closed party . . . It was in that period we discovered the dissident literature of Plyushch, Bukovsky, Solzhenitsyn—we didn't appreciate Solzhenitsyn so much but we were very impressed by Plyushch and Bukovsky. They nurtured our internal debates.⁶⁶

Once out of prison, the former prisoners took control of the AT Journal, *al-ʿAmil al-Tunsi*, from an AT group that had supported the official Chinese policy from outside prison. In the first edition they explained their intention to establish a proletarian party while seeking to learn from past tactical errors. The task would be to gradually instill a revolutionary spirit, engage in the daily class struggle building on existing working-class awareness, as well as in trade union activity, democratic work, and defense of political prisoners.⁶⁷

However, most energy was spent on internal debates about socialism and the future of the party. In 1981, a secret meeting was organized on a farm outside Tunis to discuss these matters. One group had revisited the writings of Marx and Lenin and the debate between Kautsky and Lenin on Marx's understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Anonymous, "Position de 7 Militants," 1977, Othmani-Lellouche archive.

⁶⁵ Author interview with AT section leader, later cofounder of AI and member of LTDH, 19 November 2019, La Marsa, Tunisia.

⁶⁶ Author interview with regular member of AT, later president of LTDH section, 18 November, La Marsa, Tunisia.

⁶⁷ See *al-ʿAmil al-Tunsi* 45, "Jaridatuna Tastʿaifu al-Sudura" and "Fi al-Taktik al-Naqabi."

⁶⁸ Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Marxists.org, 1918, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918/dictprole/index.htm>; Vladimir Lenin, "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky," Marxists.org, 1918, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/preface.htm>.

After World War I, Kautsky had argued that Marx believed the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat arose from the fact that the overwhelming number of citizens were proletarians and, therefore, that it was a genuine democratic notion. Kautsky furthermore contended that the masses should not be organized secretly, and above all that a secret vanguard organization inevitably would lead to the dictatorship of a single man or of a small group of leaders.

Members of this group, some of whom were also among the founders of AI-T, had in the same period been able to resume university courses that had been interrupted due to imprisonment or clandestine political activity. Among these was Mohamed Cherif Ferjani, who later in his MA thesis discussed Marx's idea that human rights were bourgeois rights, that is, "the rights of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community."⁶⁹ In a hybrid version of Marxism and human rights, Ferjani reached the conclusion that promoting human rights was a way to overcome injustices and inequalities:

The Marxists made the error of considering only the formal character of human rights in those societies that are founded on de facto inequality, and they made the error of dismissing them completely. . . . As long as the exploitation of Man by Man persists, regressive values will remain and threaten freedom, equality, of justice, of solidarity and peace. . . . Suffice to recall and observe the behavior of the Western societies in times of crisis that gave birth to colonialism, fascism and Nazism and nurtures today's xenophobia . . . and the use until this day of the most barbarous practices to perpetuate the reign of capital.⁷⁰

In another MA thesis, Sihem Ben Sedrine examined the role of the "Individual and Society in Marxist Thinking" and concluded through historical materialist reasoning, "The current era, i.e., the capitalist era, has witnessed the emergence of the individual and its claim to a privileged status of a separate private sphere from the public sphere. It is the era of human rights that sanctifies the two spheres."⁷¹

The group refused to continue clandestine work and argued that the organization should be based on a pluralist, socialist, and public debate. A preparatory document listed among the objectives of the future organization: the struggle for improved living conditions of the working masses; continued democratic engagement based on human rights, combatting all discriminations; a general amnesty for all political prisoners; and change of all legislation that did not conform to the Constitution. Finally, it insisted on the importance of the anti-imperialist struggle to free Tunisia from its dependency on the international capitalist system, while supporting liberation and peace movements, notably those of the Palestinians.⁷² In 1983, members of the group established the Progressive Socialist Rally (Tajmm'ū al-Taquadummi al-Ishtiraki).⁷³

The remaining AT members believed that time was not ripe to give up clandestine work and retained Lenin's view that the dictatorship of the proletariat remained a necessity in the historical phase to come. They continued past efforts to establish a proletarian vanguard

⁶⁹ Karl Marx, "On *The Jewish Question*," 1844, Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question>.

⁷⁰ Mohamed Cherif Ferjani, "Laïcité et Droits de l'homme Dans La Pensée Politique Arabe" [Secularism and Human Rights in Arab Political Thought] (Mémoire de D.E.A. en Sciences Politiques, Université Lumière, Lyon 2, 1986), 35, 95. Ferjani was a cofounder of AI Tunisia and later professor at the University of Lyon.

⁷¹ Sihem Ben Sedrine, "Individu et Société Dans La Pensée Marxiste" (Mémoire, Maitrise d'enseignement de philosophie, Université de Toulouse, Mirail, 1984), 79. Sihem Ben Sedrine became board member of LTDH, cofounder of CNLT, and later president of the Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission.

⁷² See an early declaration of the group Ittijahat Tatawwuri al-Wada'ā al-Rahina wa ma Tatruhu min Maham by Mohamed Cherif Ferjani, in *Le Maghreb* 32 (1982): 17–18.

⁷³ Ferid Boufaden, "Constitution d'une Nouvelle Formation Politique Tunisienne: Le Rassemblement Socialiste Progressiste (R.S.P)," *Le Maghreb* 82 (17 December 1983): 12–13.

party and in 1986 founded the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (Hizb al- 'Ummal al-Shuy'ui al- Tunisi; Parti communiste des ouvriers de Tunisie, or PCOT), calling upon workers, peasants, and intellectuals to combat neocolonialism and imperialist hegemony, protect Tunisia's sovereignty through free elections, and promote equal rights within the framework of a secular state.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In February 1982, the LTDH organized its first elective general assembly under the control of the liberal group. Representatives of all AT currents came to the meeting seeking to invest in the new political spaces created by the league. Few from the Amnesty group were present, however, because they perceived it as having more to do with political maneuverings than with human rights.

Several activists wished to run for the board, arguing that they were the ones who had suffered from repression while struggling against the regime.⁷⁵ The liberals, however, did not allow any former AT members to be on the list of board candidates. Instead, they co-opted two reformists, considered left-wingers, who had distanced themselves from the *Perspectives* group's confrontational line following its turn to Maoism in 1967–68.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the final congress resolution presented a consensual set of recommendations encompassing the areas of concerns of the past solidarity groups, such as the amendment of all anticonstitutional legislation, the opening of inquiries into allegations of torture, and restriction of the power of the security services.⁷⁷ These were basic requirements needed to ensure spaces for pluralist politics sought by both the liberals and the left-wing activists, and at the 1985 and 1989 general assemblies representatives of the former AT factions were elected to the board, formally endorsing their turn to human rights.

The previous pages have illustrated that the processes behind this turn were complex and hybrid. They did not stem from international norm diffusion, nor from paradigmatic ideological shifts or the demise of socialist, anti-imperialist thinking. Resulting from a complex set of factors, they rather built on the reconsideration of a past ideological model.

One group of AT activists broke with the past idea of a clandestine vanguard organization and the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Nevertheless, they preserved several elements of their ideological beliefs: a historical materialist sense of progress and identification of capitalism and imperialism as perpetrators of injustice. Even the AI-T founders' break with their Marxism-Leninism was less paradigmatic than it might appear at first glance. Having abandoned notions of class struggle and of the dictatorship of the proletariat, their new activism remained rooted in an accusatory model, based on a sense of indignation when confronted with injustices. Establishing an Amnesty section in Tunisia represented continuity with the internationalism of their early student days and the former work of the Tunisian solidarity groups.

Finally, not all AT activists broke with their ideological and organizational past. Those who managed to rebuild clandestine group dynamics, and a hierarchal vanguard party, retained the basic elements of a Marxist-Leninist worldview while engaging in human rights work for strategic and tactical reasons.

The AT activists shared the early desire of the LTDH, not for transposing UN international norms to the domestic political scene, but for opening public spaces for plural democratic work and thereby countering the regime's practice of torture, political trials, and disregard for fundamental freedoms. New and complex processes would follow later in the 1980s as the

⁷⁴ Khémaïs Arfaoui, "Bayan al-T'asisi li- Hizb al-'Ummal al-Shuy'ui al-Tunisi," in *1986 al-Mu'arada al-Radikaliyya wa-l-Sulta Zaman Burjiba wa Bin 'Ali*, ed. Khémaïs Arfaoui (Tunis: éd. Thakafia, 2016).

⁷⁵ Radhia Nassraoui, "Haqa'iq Hawla al-Mu'tamar al-Awwal li-Rabitat al-Difa'a 'an Huquq al-Insan," *Le Maghreb* 44 (1982): 37–38.

⁷⁶ These were Mohamed Charfi and Khémaïs Chammari.

⁷⁷ Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, "Motion de Droits de l'Homme," *Le Maghreb* 44 (1982): 34–35.

organizations developed dynamics of their own, and as changes occurred on the national political scene, such as the consolidation of the Islamist movement, Bourguiba's deposition in 1987 by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Making sense of the Tunisian left's turn to human rights in Tunisia is not merely important for understanding one fragment of Tunisian history. It illustrates the need to capture the diversity of meanings attributed to human rights, and also of acknowledging that multiple histories underlie these meanings when dealing with later human rights activism in Tunisia, in the MENA region, and elsewhere in the Global South.

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