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SUBJECT: Tunisia: Bourguiba Struggles to Strengthen his Grip

NESA M# 86-20068

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Central Intelligence Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

8 May 1986

Tunisia: Bourguiba Struggles to Strengthen his Grip [redacted] 25X1

Summary

President Bourguiba's recent cabinet shuffle underscores his increasing preoccupation with quashing dissent, which over the long-term could affect US relations. Bourguiba has been a staunch supporter of the United States and we believe that his opponents will be quick to link Washington with the embattled regime. [redacted]

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Bourguiba's recent reorganization of his cabinet has focused on shifting some of the power of Prime Minister Mzali, his handpicked successor, to General Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, a military officer in charge of the police and intelligence apparatus. This shift could be a signal that Mzali is in serious trouble and that the President believes he needs a stronger man as Prime Minister and heir apparent.

Over the last several months Bourguiba had ordered a series of repressive measures to cope with increasing political unrest. His infirmity and increasingly erratic decisionmaking is widely known among Tunisians. Although his opponents may be intimidated in the short term, Bourguiba's crackdown could bring cooperation among his foes and increasing violence. [redacted]

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Eighty-four-year-old President Bourguiba is resorting to heavyhanded tactics to shore up his authority. He recently intensified an anticorruption campaign to cow critics within the Tunisian elite and ordered the arrest on corruption charges of

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 8 May 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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two prominent businessmen linked politically and economically to his estranged wife, Wassila. The singling out of the businessmen is seen locally as related to palace politics, but the vindictiveness of the campaign and some tough prison sentences has badly shaken the business elite, traditionally one of the strongest supporters of the ruling party. [redacted]

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At the same time, the government has cracked down on other influential groups. Habib Achour, long time head of the country's main trade union federation (UGTT) has been jailed on trumped-charges and the union leadership dismantled. Bourguiba also ordered the arrest of Ahmed Mestiri, the principal opposition leader and secretary general of the Social Democratic Movement (MDS), who had faulted the President for not criticizing the US airstrike on Libya. Although Mestiri has been released from jail for health reasons, his criminal record could effectively exclude opposition participation in legislative elections scheduled for November. Since these elections are only held every five years and the opposition was denied seats in the 1981 elections, frustration among anti-Bourguiba segments of the population is probably on the rise. Indeed, Bourguiba appears certain to add fuel to the fire by pushing ahead with a law which will bar parties founded on religion--a measure that will effectively exclude Islamists--many of whom are non-extremists.

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[redacted]

The Bourguiba regime also has instituted a get tough policy toward students. The university campuses have been subject to police rule since mid-February and Islamists on and off campus have been hassled. In late April, the shooting of an Islamic student leader by the police sparked violent demonstrations that led to the arrest of more than 1,000 and the conscription of many into the armed forces. Some of the Tunis University campuses remain closed and most others are paralyzed by student strikes. The regime's repressive measures have led previously antagonistic Islamic militants and extreme leftists to work together. [redacted]

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#### Is Mzali On the Way Out?

Another sign that Bourguiba is making security the number one priority of the regime is his decision to transfer the Interior Ministry from his handpicked successor Prime Minister Mzali to General Ben Ali--his chief security officer in charge of the police and intelligence apparatus. According to the US Embassy in Tunis, most Tunisians think of Ben Ali as a tough cop who is eager to crack down on government opponents; Mzali is more the conciliator. [redacted]

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This change coincides with persistent rumors in Tunis over the past few months that Bourguiba has decided to replace Mzali, who has held his post for five years. The summary firing of Mzali's right-hand man, Merzri Chekir supports this belief. So too does the fact that Bourguiba chose Public Works Minister Mohamad Sayah--not Mzali--to organize the ruling Destorian

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Socialist Party (PSD's) June congress. Two other Mzali proteges also have been shifted out of their posts by the President-- Mohamed Fredj Chedli from the Ministry of National Education and Amur Ghedira from the position of Secretary of State at the Ministry of the Interior to Mayor of Monastir. [redacted]

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There is no shortage of personalities waiting in the wings to be asked by Bourguiba to be the new heir apparent. These include Mansour Skhiri, the Minister at the Presidency, who has constant access to the President and on whom Bourguiba has relied as a way of balancing Mzali's opinions; Mohamed Sayah, who has built a strong political base primarily of loyal PSD members who owe their positions to him; and Ben Ali, whose power derives from his control over security forces and ties to the military. The President's son, Habib junior and Foreign Minister Caïd Essebsi may also be contenders, although their influence has waned recently. [redacted]

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### Prospects and Implications for the United States

For the present, the way still appears clear for a relatively unobstructed and generally pro-Western transition in Tunisia. All of Bourguiba's potential successors have had training in the United States or France, are basically pro-Western, and almost certainly would continue to look to the West for economic and military assistance. Nevertheless, the post Bourguiba generation leaders probably will be less sympathetic to Washington's interests than Bourguiba. [redacted]

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[redacted] most of the Tunisian elite believes that the United States has paid insufficient attention to the country's security needs. The Israeli airstrike on the PLO headquarters in Tunis last October added to their frustration with Washington. We believe each probably would strive for a somewhat more nonaligned position, cooperate more closely with African and Arab neighbors, and distance themselves to an extent from the United States. [redacted]

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Bourguiba's repressive measures could push events in Tunisia in a way detrimental to US interests. The Tunisian political climate could help forge links between factions who have had little in common and make them into a formidable antiregime force. Leaders of the Islamic fundamentalists and leftists groups--including students, workers, and the urban poor--would highlight the President's close relationship with Washington and accent the point that US security assistance is being used for repression. Such anti-American sentiment would especially be exploited in the economically depressed south by Libyan-trained dissidents who are well placed to play upon social unrest. Such developments could make an orderly, relatively pro-Western succession difficult in Tunisia, although we still think the ruling party would prevail. If events in Tunisia took a negative turn, however, we would expect the moderate pro-Western military to step in to maintain political stability and socioeconomic continuity. [redacted]

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