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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

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SECRET

March 4, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Harold H. Saunders *HHS*  
Samuel M. Hoskinson *SMH*

SUBJECT: Situation in Tunisia

Attached is a memorandum describing the internal political situation in Tunisia and some implications for our bilateral relations as the era of President Bourguiba draws to an end. It is addressed to the President in case you wish to send it on to him.

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INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

DOS Review Completed.

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Eventual Transfer of Power in Tunisia

As you know, President Bourguiba was recently at Walter Reed Hospital for diagnosis of his deteriorating brain condition and is now undergoing treatment in Switzerland. He is not mortally ill, but there is little prospect that he will be able to resume his duties except, at most, on a part time and largely ceremonial basis. Below just for background are a few comments on the elements in the situation in Tunisia and the eventual possible implications for our bilateral relations.

Succession Problem

Until now in Tunisia political power has been highly centralized and personalized in Bourguiba. The people and institutions under him have been of only secondary importance. Fortunately, Bourguiba's decline has been gradual and this has given him and the other leaders some chance to focus on the succession problem.

At Bourguiba's initiative the constitution was amended last year to provide for the automatic succession of the Prime Minister should the President die, resign or become incapacitated. Then in early February, Prime Minister Nourma proposed, presumably with Bourguiba's approval, a new procedure for selecting a successor. Under the new measures a Presidential vacancy would be filled by the President of the National Assembly for "a few weeks," during which time he would be required to arrange for National Presidential elections in which he could not himself be a candidate.

Other pending amendments to the constitution would circumscribe the authority of the President by increasing the powers of the Prime Minister and National Assembly. They would, for instance, give the now relatively powerless National Assembly the right under certain as yet unspecified circumstances to force the Prime Minister and his Cabinet to resign.

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The National Assembly has now appointed a special commission to study the proposals, which are the result of extensive deliberation by the Tunisian leadership over the past eight months. It is expected that the measures will be passed with few if any changes, although the process can not be completed before mid-May at the earliest.

Bilateral Relations

Even if the transfer of power and democratization measures go smoothly, we must expect some modification of the relationship between the United States and Tunisia. Much of the parallelism between Tunisia and U.S. foreign policy and friendship for the U.S. has stemmed from Bourguiba personally. He has viewed the U.S. as a powerful friend in the strategic North Africa-Mediterranean area and one that has stood by Tunisia in its numerous quarrels with the French and has contributed to Tunisia's economic development.

Bourguiba's political heir or heirs are less likely to feel the same personal sense of attachment for the U.S. Moreover, none of them--Nouira, former Prime Minister Ladgham, Foreign Minister Masmoudi, or Minister of Interior Ahmed Mestri--has either the personality or prestige that would make it possible for him fully to withstand domestic and Arab pressures for a more "Arab" policy on the Middle East and more non-alignment on other issues of importance to us. On the other hand, the new leadership is not likely to respond to Soviet blandishments, although any further reductions in our economic and military aid will make it more difficult for Tunisia to resist Soviet offers.

In short, a shift in political forces is already underway and with it a change in the tone of our relationship. In this process, the Tunisians may begin to gradually adopt more positions at variance with ours, both on regional and wider international issues. However, barring a major revolution in Tunisia, which nobody foresees, the chances are that the Tunisians will continue to want a relationship with the U.S. Even if they do not, Tunisia can not damage U.S. interests in the Mediterranean. We have no economic interests there and no military interests. What is likely to happen when Bourguiba goes is that we will drift into a new relationship rather than finding ourselves precipitated into one.

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