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## **The Emergence of the National Movement in Tunisia at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries**

### **Abstract**

The national movement played a fundamental role in raising political awareness among the Tunisian people and became a key instrument in confronting the French administration. In this context, the Tunisian elite made significant efforts to resist French policies and oppose projects aimed at consolidating control over Tunisia. The political transition was a direct outcome of the developments experienced by the Tunisian nation in its struggle against French colonial rule, which sought to dominate the country.

**Keywords:** *National movement, Colonial policy, Citizenship, Protectorate, Tunisian youth*

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## **XIX və XX əsrlərin qovşağında Tunisdə Milli Hərəkətin yaranması**

### **Xülasə**

Milli hərəkət Tunis xalqı arasında siyasi şüurun yüksəldilməsində fundamental rol oynamış və Fransa administrasiyasına qarşı mübarizədə əsas vasitəyə çevrilmişdir. Bu kontekstdə Tunis elitası Fransa siyasətinə qarşı müqavimət göstərmək və ölkə üzərində nəzarəti möhkəmləndirməyə yönəlmiş layihələrə qarşı çıxmaq üçün mühüm səylər göstərmişdir. Siyasi keçid, Fransa müstəmləkə hakimiyyətinin ölkəyə nəzarət etmək məqsədilə həyata keçirdiyi siyasətə qarşı Tunis xalqının apardığı mübarizənin birbaşa nəticəsi olmuşdur.

**Açar sözlər:** *Milli hərəkət, müstəmləkəçilik siyasəti, vətəndaşlıq, protektorat, Tunis gəncliyi*

### **Introduction**

Following the establishment of the French Protectorate over Tunisia in 1881, the national elite sought appropriate solutions to counter the policies that the French administration intended to implement in the country. These policies were primarily framed as economic measures aimed at improving Tunisia's conditions and preserving its social fabric. However, they ultimately served as strategic plans to consolidate French control over Tunisia and its people. From the outset, the Tunisian national elite rejected the French presence in the region. Their initial response was armed resistance, which was later followed by political action, drawing inspiration from the Algerian experience.

### **Research**

Given the circumstances Tunisia faced after the imposition of the protectorate and the resistance to French occupation, political activism emerged as an alternative means of opposition. Initially, these efforts were individual initiatives, but they gradually evolved into collective action as political awareness spread among Tunisian youth. Nationalism was deeply rooted in the Tunisian elite,

driving them to unify their ranks and intensify their activities, particularly among young Tunisians. This marked the beginning of organized efforts to resist French administration and its attempts to assert control over Tunisia, a strategically significant part of North Africa and the Maghreb region.

### **1. Defining the National Movement**

Nationalism, in all its forms, is the driving force that fosters unity and cohesion among individuals, strengthening their allegiance to their homeland, its traditions, and its defense. The sense of national identity develops from an early stage in life, shaped by an individual's immediate environment and upbringing. The patriotic sentiments of a citizen are often guided by emotional responses rather than purely rational considerations.

Patriotism differs from civic responsibility (*Civism*), which refers to a citizen's commitment to the public good. Nationalism is manifested through shared bonds among members of a nation, including common origins, language, faith, or shared interests and sentiments. It ties an individual to a specific state, based on a reciprocal relationship where the state provides protection and the individual offers allegiance (Badawi, 1989).

Citizenship, as a legal status, can be either *native-born*, granted by birthright, or *acquired* through other means, such as marriage or naturalization. Additionally, legal entities, such as institutions and organizations, acquire the nationality of the country in which they are established and are thus entitled to its protection.

#### **1.1. Nationalism and Citizenship**

The concepts of nationalism and citizenship are derived from the root word *watan* (homeland), which refers to a specific geographic territory defined by recognized geopolitical borders, commonly known in modern political discourse as a *state*. This homeland is inhabited by a group of people known as *citizens*, who are granted various rights and benefits while also bearing responsibilities and obligations by virtue of their belonging to the nation. The homeland ensures social security, dignified family life, economic opportunities, personal freedoms, and access to fundamental services such as education and healthcare. These privileges, however, come with corresponding duties, including respect for national symbols, preservation of national identity, dedication to the country's progress, and the willingness to defend it when necessary.

The terms *nationalism* and *citizenship* carry distinct yet interrelated meanings. Nationalism conveys a deep sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the homeland and its fundamental elements. Citizenship, on the other hand, reflects active participation in national life, encompassing conduct, responsibilities, and civic engagement.

A citizen's status defines their rights and national obligations, which are understood and fulfilled through civic education. Citizenship is particularly characterized by unwavering loyalty to one's country, commitment to its service in both peace and war, and cooperation with fellow citizens to achieve national objectives.

A nation consists of individuals bound by a shared culture, unified by common origins, language, and religion, and linked through a collective history, social heritage, and economic interests. These individuals reside within a defined territory and work towards sustaining these bonds through political structures within the framework of the state.

A nation is a country inhabited by a people who feel a sense of connection and belonging, even if this country is under the control of another state or if the people have not yet formed a state of their own. The concept of *Fatherland* often reflects this idea.

Many believe that a nation consists of a collection of characteristics, traits, customs, traditions, and social systems that are gradually imprinted over generations on a group of people united by a common linguistic, literary, and historical heritage, and by shared memories, hopes, interests, and regional influences that complement each other. This definition integrates various perspectives on the nature of a nation (Haroun, 1998).

In the contemporary context, based on these viewpoints, we can define a nation as a group of people who share a common language, unified culture, and common interests. These factors enable us to distinguish one nation from another.

Nationalism is a national expression of love and loyalty to one's homeland. It encompasses a sense of belonging to the land, the people, and a system of customs and traditions, as well as pride in the nation's history and dedication to its service.

The concept of nationalism is a psychological feeling and a social expression that has existed throughout history and in the lives of all peoples. Evidence of this is found in the literature of many nations, where prominent literary works celebrate people's devotion to their country, their willingness to die defending its freedom and dignity, and the symbols and slogans that glorify national pride and heroic achievements (Browal, 2020).

As defined in encyclopedias, nationalism is a movement of people who recognize the necessity of forming a group based on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties, among others. It originates from an ideology that seeks to empower the nation to practice politics focused solely on its own capabilities, rejecting anything that may limit its freedom to act (Zoubeiri, 1999).

## **2- Factors Leading to the Emergence of the National Movement in Tunisia**

The origins of the Tunisian national movement date back to before the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881. At that time, the enlightened elite sought to establish a constitution that would place the source of power in the hands of the people and resist the French temptation to convince the Bey to separate from the state of Khayr al-Din in favor of Ottoman intentions. Early leaders of the movement, headed by Khayr al-Din, were alert to the colonial intentions aiming to weaken the kingdom and annex it, as had been the case with Algeria (Menasria, 1986). This movement is considered one of the oldest anti-colonial movements in the Arab world. Those studying its stages find a comprehensive record of the struggle of the people for their freedom and independence over nearly seventy years.

The movement began with armed resistance against French aggression, and when it lacked material resources, it resorted to political struggle using various methods. The series of struggles continued uninterrupted from the moment the national armed forces surrendered until today. This struggle evolved over time according to the changing circumstances and adapted as necessary to serve the interests of the country. Despite the strength of the French forces and their colonial methods, they were never able to eliminate the movement. In fact, the persecutions imposed by the French only made the movement stronger and more widespread. Every form of persecution it endured made it emerge even more powerful (Thamer, 1988).

The national movement was a reaction to the control of the colonizers, and the majority of people rejected it for religious reasons (as was the case for the general population and deep Tunisia), economic reasons (as exploitation was the ultimate goal of the protectorate system), psychological reasons (since the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized was never easy), and ideological reasons (as the local intellectual elite, who had been educated in French schools, could only align with the democratic ideals promoted by the French education system) (Ajina, 1993).

However, the expression of the Tunisians' stance against the imposed colonial system varied due to several factors, including:

- The fire of the national movement initially flared up intensely but briefly following an uprising, then quieted for a relatively long period of about a quarter of a century (from 1881–1882 to 1906–1907).
- The national movement gradually took shape on new foundations and demonstrated its existence before World War I (1907–1912), and even more so afterward (1919–1925).

### **2.1. The National Movement and the Path to Independence**

The sense of national identity became deeply rooted, and the movement reached its peak in the 1930s, entering its final and decisive phase, which ultimately led to independence in 1956 (Cherif, 1993).

Colonialism, which seeks to exploit occupied territories through foreign investments, the extraction of raw materials, and the opening of markets to European manufactured goods—while also establishing settler communities—inevitably undermined the interests of the vast majority of the local population. Consequently, these conditions fostered the emergence and growth of national consciousness among the indigenous people (Mahjoubi, 1986).

Thus, the Tunisian national movement was, above all, a product of the economic and social contradictions that arose with the influx of French capital into Tunisia. This development created a fundamental conflict between the interests of France and its settlers, on the one hand, and those of the majority of the local population, on the other.

One of the movement's defining characteristics was its organic connection to modern principles, which had been promoted by reformist pioneers since the second half of the nineteenth century. Before the establishment of the Protectorate, the Tunisian educational movement played a crucial role in spreading and advocating these principles, particularly following the founding of the Bardo Military School and the Sadiki College in 1875. This reformist momentum persisted during the colonial period with the establishment of the Khaldounia Association in 1896, the Association of Former Students of Sadiki College in 1905, and the Tunisian Forum (Le Cercle Tunisien) in the same year.

Moreover, the Arabic-language national press, along with literary, theatrical, and civil society movements, played a significant role in disseminating and simplifying political culture. While the interaction between the formal and grassroots educational movements, on the one hand, and the press and civil society organizations, on the other, helped shape successive generations of activists, the second key feature of the national movement lay in its evolving stance toward colonial policy. The contradictions stemming from colonial rule, as well as the transformative impact of the two World Wars—both of which reinforced the global movement for decolonization—contributed to this shift.

Geopolitical changes in the Mediterranean region also played a role in shaping and advancing the national movement. Given its strategic location, Tunisia was subject to dual Eastern and Western influences. Based on these historical dynamics, the period between 1907 and 1956 can be divided into three distinct phases: The Young Tunisians Movement (1907–1918), the establishment of the Tunisian Destour Party (1919–1952), and the struggle for independence (1952–1956). Each phase represented a critical step in the development of the national movement, which evolved through successive demands: first, for local participation in governance, then for a government accountable to an elected council, followed by the pursuit of internal autonomy, and ultimately, the achievement of full independence.

### 3- Outcomes

The first political movement with a clear set of demands directed against the Protectorate authority, and the first collective national response in Tunis, was the *Tunisian Affair*. This movement was led by a group of prominent figures from the capital whose interests had been adversely affected by privileges previously granted to them by the Bey. Additionally, it impacted certain workers employed in the same sector. The movement took on a popular dimension, as approximately 3,000 individuals participated, including scholars from the *Zaytuna* and notable figures from Tunis.

While national activism had previously been intertwined with religious, social, and intellectual reform, the establishment of *Le Tunisien* newspaper marked a shift towards explicit political engagement, giving rise to the *Young Tunisians Movement*. However, ideological differences among its members and their diverse affiliations led to internal crises that ultimately resulted in the downfall and exclusion of its leaders.

Although Tunisians had staged uprisings following the French occupation, as well as a revolution at the onset of World War I, they eventually favored organized political action. After two early movements led by Sheikh Mohamed Sanoussi and Sheikh Mekki Ben Azouz—who were exiled and forced to emigrate, respectively—organized political activity formally began in 1905 with the *Hadhira Group*. This effort became more structured in 1908 with the formation of the *Young Tunisia Party*, organized by Ali Bach Hamba until his exile in 1911. In 1919, a group of politicians sought to capitalize on the Peace Conference that followed World War I, leading to the establishment of the *Constitutional Party* under the leadership of Sheikh Abdelaziz Thâalbi (Sarjani, 2011).

The concept of political organization gradually took shape in the minds of Tunisian intellectuals. In 1907, the first organized political movement aimed at resisting colonial rule was established in Tunisia under the leadership of Ali Bach Hamba, Sheikh Abdelaziz Thâalbi, and Mohamed Bach Hamba. This movement was influenced in both structure and objectives by the *Young Turks Movement* and played a significant role between 1907 and 1912. It enjoyed strong popular support and sought to mobilize the masses within a political framework. By doing so, it moved beyond the role the French authorities had envisioned—namely, creating a class of

intellectuals who would serve as intermediaries in spreading Western culture at the expense of Arab identity and heritage (Qadadra, 2007).

#### **4- The Tunisian Youth Movement**

The Tunisian Youth Movement emerged with the graduation of the first cohort of students from the Sadiki School in Europe and the efforts of reformist figures from the Zaytuna Mosque. Like other movements, it was rooted in resisting French colonial rule through available means while preserving the Arab-Islamic identity and cultural heritage of the Tunisian people. This movement played a pioneering role in raising national awareness, shaping the modern concept of the Tunisian nation, and later influencing the Neo Destour Party (Chaibi, 2005).

By 1907, reformist and modernist intellectuals had begun organizing themselves. On February 7, 1907, the lawyer Ali Bach Hamba founded the weekly newspaper *Le Tunisien*, published in French, to advocate for the rights and interests of the Tunisian people. The newspaper's editors exposed the fate that French authorities had imposed on Muslims, condemned injustices and privileges, and denounced inequality. They called for Tunisians' right to education, equal employment opportunities in public administration, and participation in government decision-making through an elected council. In 1909, Sheikh Abdelaziz Thâalbi joined the movement and oversaw the launch of the Arabic edition of *Le Tunisien* (Kassab, 2023).

Some French observers considered that the Tunisian Youth Movement became particularly active and alarming after 1908, especially through its Arabic-language newspapers, such as *Morshid Al-Umma*, founded by Sheikh Suleiman Al-Jadawi, and *Al-Muthir*, published by Tayyib Ben Issa. The movement was further strengthened by Abdelaziz Thâalbi, who had returned from the Arab East, the Hijaz, and Turkey, where he had embraced revolutionary Pan-Islamic ideals.

The movement was inspired by the *Young Turks* in its structure and objectives and played a significant role between 1907 and 1912. It enjoyed strong popular support and actively advanced the national struggle. It also sought to organize the masses within a political party framework, moving beyond the role that the French authorities had envisioned for it—a mere intellectual elite promoting Western culture to replace Arab identity. However, the movement's experience with colonial authorities transformed its members into staunch nationalists, deeply committed to their people and nation. This marked the first direct challenge to French colonial rule by French-educated Tunisian intellectuals and young Tunisians, whom colonial authorities had hoped to assimilate into their system (Abdullah, 1990).

Despite its influence, the movement lacked a structured political program and remained primarily reactive, focusing on resisting colonial policies and defending Tunisia's rights through press campaigns. In some respects, it was influenced by the Ottoman *Young Turks* movement, promoting Islamic solidarity. It played a crucial role in awakening national consciousness among various social groups, leading to moments of resistance that challenged French colonial dominance.

Over time, the Tunisian Youth Movement and its affiliated associations evolved into an organized national political force. They advocated for partnership with France based on equality and sought to adopt European modernization in economic and social life. They did not initially aim to resist colonial rule, believing that France remained committed to its principles of liberty, justice, and fraternity.

However, Ali Bach Hamba and his associates later realized that the colonial authorities' promises of reform and participation were mere deception. For the first time, they initiated labor strikes, starting with railway workers. This shift gave the movement wider popular support and helped foster political awareness among the public. These developments became evident when Tunisians expressed solidarity with Libyans during the Italian invasion of Tripoli. This solidarity culminated in the *Jellaz Affair*, where clashes erupted between Tunisians and the Italian community in response to the Libyan struggle.

### **Conclusion**

The Tunisian elite managed to follow in the footsteps of the Algerian elite in many aspects, employing similar means to achieve a set of demands. After the failure of armed resistance, they adopted political activism as an alternative approach in dealing with French colonial rule. This shift materialized in a series of demands that initially emerged on an individual level but later evolved

into collective demands under the framework of associations, clubs, and eventually political parties. These entities stood against French policies, which sought to implement various projects aimed at consolidating control over the Tunisian people. However, the persistent efforts of the Tunisian elite compelled the French administration to reconsider some of its strategies in an attempt to mislead both Tunisian and international public opinion. Despite these maneuvers, the resilience and determination of the Tunisian elite drove them to continue their struggle through various means, steadfastly resisting French colonial projects and policies imposed on the Tunisian people.

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