

TUG OF WAR BEFORE THE REVOLUTION:
US-TUNISIA RELATIONS THROUGH THE WIKILEAKS (2003-2010)

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Acronyms

ACST	American Cooperative School of Tunis
AJT	<i>Association des Journalistes Tunisiens</i> Tunisian Journalist Association
CODEL	US Congress Delegation
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
INEX	International Research and Exchanges Board
IT	Information Technology
JMC	Joint Military Commission
LTDH	<i>Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme</i> Tunisian Human Rights League
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEPI	Middle East Partnership Initiative
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PDP	<i>Parti Démocrate Progressiste</i> Progressive Democratic Party
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
RCD	<i>Rassemblement Constitutionnelle Démocratique</i> Democratic Constitutional Rally
SNJT	<i>Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens</i> National Union for Tunisian Journalists
SJT	Tunisian Journalists Union <i>Syndicat Journalistes Tunisiens</i>
S&T	Science and Technology
TIFA	Trade and Investment Framework Agreement
UGTT	<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail</i> [General Union of Tunisian Workers]
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialistic Republics
WSIS	World Summit for the Information Society

Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the US-Tunisia relationship in the period from 2003 to 2010. It is the period that ended with the *Revolution of Dignity and Freedom* in Tunisia in late 2010 to early 2011. The Tunisian Revolution attracted major interest of academic historiography and journalism, which appeared in the post-Revolution period. Among the discussions on the reasons, causes and events that led to the uprising, a perception pertinent to the US-Tunisia relations was also prevalent. The perception that the US interest for what was happening in the country, in the period of main concern here, was *degraded* and *supportive* to the Tunisian autocratic regime. The arguments supporting this perception were rather based on the impetus of the established stereotypes about the past US-Tunisia relations, according to the *wide* view of US foreign policies focused on the Middle East and North Africa region. Nevertheless, the reality of the relations evolved *in situ* in the post-September 11 period to the Revolution, as it is shown in this thesis, proves the contrary: the US concern, attention and involvement in what was happening in Tunisia in that period was neither *degraded* nor *supportive* in favour of Ben Ali's regime. The US was there, active, and constantly pressuring *in situ* the regime for democratisation and respect of freedoms. Maybe this US involvement was not always resonant outside Tunisia but not at all *degraded*. To prove this, the use of the WikiLeaks Tunis Cables is of major importance. Properly mined and used as primary sources of *close* view information lead to new knowledge about the US-Tunisia relations. Despite the impact of few already well-known Cables, describing the abuses and corruption of the Tunisian regime, used and reused mostly by the media and in lesser extent in academic research, the selected Cables analysed in this research are not well known. The Cables as *history-telling* primary sources add new insight on yet unrevealed facts about the US-Tunisia relations in the 2000-2010 period illuminating unknown aspects that contradict established views about these relations.

An overview of the US-Tunisia relations in the second half of the twentieth century, after the country's Independence in 1957, provides the general background. The main part of the thesis is the formation of eight interacting topics related to the period 2003-2010 and shaped by the original content of the selected Cables, which become sources of scholar research. The actions and reactions by the US and the Tunisian government regarding important but lesser known events and crises during that period are thus put in evidence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The four weeks between December 17, 2010 and January 14, 2011 is an important period of modern Tunisian history, due to the popular uprising, result of a continuously evolving unrest in the country since the beginning of the twenty first century. The direct result of the uprising was the ousting of president Ben Ali (ruling for almost a quarter of a century, since 1987) and the overthrow of his repressing regime. This relatively short period of uprising, named by Tunisians as the *Revolution for Dignity and Freedom*¹ (hereafter the Revolution), the first in a series of other uprisings in the Arab world soon after.²

The Revolution brought to an end the three distinct periods of Tunisia after the Independence in 1957, starting a new era, the post-Revolution period of the country. The three periods defined in this thesis are: (a) the *first* period from 1957 to 1987, corresponding to Bourguiba's presidency, (b) the *second* period from 1987 to 2000 with Bourguiba's successor Ben Ali in presidency, and (c) the *third* period from 2000 to 2010 (also under Ben Ali) ending with the Revolution.³ During these three periods, the US-Tunisia relations existed uninterrupted. After the relations established with the leadership of the Tunisian liberation movement, during Tunisia's struggle for Independence,⁴ the US was the first among the great powers that recognised Tunisia as sovereign country on May 1956.⁵

Strongly tied during the *first* period to the late phase of the Cold War, US-Tunisia relations were not always unclouded mainly during the *second* and *third* periods. In

¹ Mohamed-Salah Omri. 'Tunisia: a revolution for dignity and freedom that can not be colour-coded'. *Transnational Institute (TNI)*. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/tunisia-revolution-dignity-and-freedom-can-not-be-colour-coded>, January 29, 2011. (Accessed June 17, 2019). Also, Mohamed-Salah Omri. 'A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry', *boundary 2*, 39(1) (2012), 137-165, Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-1506283>. (Accessed March 4, 2019).

² Jean-Pierre Filiu. *The Arab Revolution. Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ Lotfi Ben Rejeb also defines three periods: his *first* period coincide with that defined in this thesis (1957-1987), the *second* and *third* being different. Ben Rejeb's *second* period covers the entire era of Ben Ali's rule (1987-2011) and the *third* "explores the new context of revolution as a trigger for policy re-evaluation ...". Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia: What New Engagement after an Expendable 'Friendship'?' In Nouri Gana (ed.). *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Chapter 3, (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 81-102.

⁴ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. 2nd Edition, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 79-134.

⁵ US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/> (Accessed April 18, 2019).

the contexts of the Cold War first, and the post-Cold War after, the status of US-Tunisia relations was dependent on two main issues: the US foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Tunisia's internal affairs, both influenced differently by the changes in the Arab world.

The sources for the study of the US-Tunisia relations, during the three periods, are mainly the relevant academic historiography and journalism, the governmental and non-governmental posts of documents and the Tunis US Embassy confidential diplomatic Cables (hereafter the Cables) sent in the period from 2003 to 2010. The Cables were among those released by WikiLeaks⁶ and by five major international newspapers in November 28, 2010.⁷ Only few of them were widely used and reused becoming known and *popular* thanks to the media, the majority remained unknown and unused.

The results of the analysis of Cables used in this thesis contrasts the generally established view about an assumed *degraded*⁸ role of the US in Tunisia in the period interesting this research (2003-2010).

1.1. Periods and views

The US-Tunisia relations are adequately covered in the general and specialised historiography. In the *first*, *second* and *third* period, the relevant historiography evolved respectively (a) in the context of the Cold War and the rising Arab nationalism, (b) in the context of the post-Cold War and the expanding Islamism in the Arab world, and (c) in the context of the post-September 11 attacks, the

⁶ WikiLeaks. <https://wikileaks.org> (Accessed April 18, 2019).

⁷ Less than a month before the start of the uprising on December 17, 2010, the WikiLeaks and five major international newspapers published leaked confidential documents about Tunisia issued by the Tunis US Embassy for the period 2003 to 2010: *The New York Times* (USA), *The Guardian* (UK), *Le Monde* (France), *El Pais* (Spain), *Der Spiegel* (Germany). See: Scott Shane and Andrew W. Lehrennov. 'Leaked Cables Offer Raw Look at U.S. Diplomacy'. *The New York Times*, November 28, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/world/29cables.html> (Accessed April 20, 2019). Also: David Leigh. 'US embassy cables leak sparks global diplomatic crisis', *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cable-leak-diplomacy-crisis>, (Accessed April 20, 2019), and Sylvie Kauffmann. 'Pourquoi *Le Monde* publie les documents WikiLeaks'. *Le Monde*, November 28, 2010. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2010/11/28/pourquoi-le-monde-publie-les-documents-wikileaks_1446074_3210.html (Accessed April 19, 2019).

⁸ With the term *degrade* (*degraded/degrading*) used in this thesis, is meant that the US foreign policy in the *first* and *second* periods (1957-2000) of post-Independence Tunisia, lowered or distracted attention for the country in the *third* period (2000-2010), as it is assumed in historiography. The latter was a perception contrasted in this thesis by the analysis of the Cables that show a transformation of the US foreign policy in Tunisia, in the *third* period, from the traditional *business as usual* practice to a new policy of pressure for democratisation and respect of freedoms.

subsequent US *War on Terror*,⁹ and the Islamist terrorism. In all periods, the US foreign policy focused on Tunisia as part of a US *wide* view at the MENA region. This *wide* (regional) view is reflected in the historiography, preceding the Cables, about the US-Tunisia relations in the *first* and *second* periods of post-Independence Tunisia.

The Revolution, a turning point in modern Tunisia's history, attracted the interest of a new wave historiography that appeared in the early post-Revolution period. The interest of this historiography was focused on the reasons and the causes of the Revolution in the *third* period after Independence. Then, the WikiLeaks Cables came as new sources of data, to introduce a *close* view on the US policy on Tunisia. This thesis is concentrating on US-Tunisia relations in the *third* period of the country's post-Independence history. It is aiming at the examination of these relations through the Cables' *close* (local) view focus on Tunisia, with emphasis on human rights and press freedom.

The Cables, as *close* views *in situ* of US foreign policy on Tunisia, used as primary sources, contain a significant quantity of still unused data, which can lead to the extraction of new information and knowledge about US-Tunisia relations in that period.

1.2. American ties

US-Tunisia relations existed long before Tunisian Independence. They were among the oldest established bilateral relations of the US after its Declaration of Independence and the existence of the US as an independent country in 1776.¹⁰ Tunisia, a Regency of the Ottoman Empire (Tunis at that time), Morocco and the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers and Tripoli were the countries with which John Adams¹¹ suggested in 1778 to sign treaties urgently. The scope was to put an end to Barbary piracy against American commercial ships in the Mediterranean Sea and

⁹ Kenneth R. Bazinet. 'A Fight vs. Evil, Bush and Cabinet Tell US', *Daily News*, September 17, 2001. https://web.archive.org/web/20100505200651/http://nydaulynews.comarchives/news/2001/09/17/2001-09-17_a_fight_vs_evil_bush_and_c.html (Accessed June 25, 2019).

¹⁰ US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/> (Accessed April 18, 2019).

¹¹ John Adams, the Vice President of George Washington, was to become the second President of the US.

along the Spanish and Portuguese coasts.¹² The first agreement of friendship and trade was concluded between Tunis and the US on March 26, 1799,¹³ and the first American consulate in Tunis was established on January 20, 1800,¹⁴ a little more than a year before the French invasion and the colonisation of Tunisia that lasted seventy-five years to 1956.¹⁵

The first Tunisian special envoy was sent to the US in 1805 and the first ambassador arrived from Tunis, carrying a message of friendship to the American people in 1865, after the American Civil War, received by the US president Thomas Jefferson.¹⁶

American presence in Tunis was uninterrupted since then, the US-Tunisia relations remained tight after Tunisian Independence in 1957, in the context of the Cold War to its end in 1989. Close relations continued in the post-Cold War period to the end of the twentieth century.

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the move of the Tunis US Embassy to modern facilities in November 2002 symbolised for the Americans the commitment for “strong and important relationship that has thrived for over two hundred years”.¹⁷ The Embassy move took place almost a year after the September 11, 2001 attacks and the US headed invasion of Afghanistan a month later on October 7. But it was then, when Tunisia started experiencing a difficult political and socio-economic situation, a continuously growing crisis, evolving, in almost ten years, into a Revolution, the mass uprising of the population, especially the youth.¹⁸

¹² US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/treaty-of-peace-and-friendship-signed-at-tunis-august-28-1797/> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

¹³ Yale University. Law school Avalon Project. ‘The Barbary Treaties 1786-1816. Treaty of Peace and Friendship, Signed at Tunis August 28, 1797’. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1797t.asp (Accessed April 18, 2019). The original of this agreement, in (ottoman) Turkish is today available for viewing in the Tunis US Embassy Information Resource Center (IRC)

¹⁴ “In order to ensure the safety of its vessels and seamen, America agreed to an even higher tribute than that promised in the treaty with Tripoli. This pact would not be ratified until January 10, 1800. The failure of the various North African states of the Barbary Coast to curb piracy led to the first US military actions overseas in the First and Second Barbary Wars of the early 1800s. These actions are the source of the opening line in the US Marine Corps hymn: *From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli*”. US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/treaty-of-peace-and-friendship-signed-at-tunis-august-28-1797/>

¹⁵ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. 2nd Edition.

¹⁶ US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/treaty-of-peace-and-friendship-signed-at-tunis-august-28-1797/>

¹⁷ US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/>

¹⁸ Alcinda Honwana. ‘Youth and the Tunisian Revolution’. Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Social Prevention and Peace Forum (SPPF), September 2011.

In the *first* period of the US-Tunisia relations (1957-1987), Bourguiba¹⁹ the first president, ruled during the Cold War by his secular system of power, which came to be known as *Bourguibism*,²⁰ unique in the Arab world with many followers in today's Tunisia. Bourguiba was removed from power by his successor Ben Ali²¹ who started his presidency in 1987, two years before the start of the post-Cold War in 1989. He remained president during the post-Cold War to his ousting on January 14, 2011. During Ben Ali's time in power, *Bourguibism* was in transformation²² to almost its decay in the *third* period ending with Ben Ali's ousting.

1.3. Sources and US views

US-Tunisia relations in the *first* (1957-1987) and the *second* (1987-2000) period are adequately covered in the general and specialised historiography. In the *first* period, the relevant historiography evolved in the context of the Cold War, *Bourguibism* and the rising Arab nationalism. In the *second* period it evolved in the context of the post-Cold War, post-*Bourguibism* and the expanding Islamism and Islamist terrorism. In both periods, US foreign policy approached Tunisia as a part of a *wide* view US focus on MENA region.

The existing historiography on the US-Tunisia relations concerning the *third* (2000-2010) period was mainly based on the general issue of the post-Cold War *wide* view US focus on the MENA region, facing now the regional threat of growing Islamist terrorism. In this US policy, Tunisia was always seen in historiography as part of the regional US view on MENA.

http://webarchive.ssrc.org/pdfs/Alcinda_Honwana_Youth_and_the_Tunisian_Revolution_September_2011-CPPF_policy%20paper.pdf (Accessed April 19, 2019)

¹⁹ During Bourguiba's thirty-year rule in Tunisia the US administration was under seven Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961), John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), Richard Nixon (1969-1974), Gerald Ford (1974-1977), Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989).

²⁰ With *Bourguibism* it is termed the political line of thought and practice implemented in Tunisia during Bourguiba's rule and partly by his successors. Carl L. Brown. 'Bourguiba and Bourguibism Revisited: Reflections and Interpretation'. *Middle East Journal*, 55(1) (2001), 43-57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4329581>. (Accessed June 2, 2019).

²¹ During Ben Ali's twenty-five-year rule in Tunisia the US administration was under four Presidents: George H. W. Bush (1989-1993), Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Barack Obama (2009-2017).

²² Larbi Sadiki. 'The Search for Citizenship in Ben Ali's Tunisia: Democracy versus Unity'. *Political Studies*, 50 (2002), 497-513. <http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/politics/research/readingroom/SadikiTunisia.pdf> (Accessed June 28, 2019). Also, Richard Seymour. 'The rise and fall of Ben Ali'. *SocialistWorker.org*, January 18, 2011. <https://socialistworker.org/2011/01/18/rise-and-fall-of-ben-ali> (Accessed June 28, 2019)

1.3.1. *Wide view and sources*

Historiography regarding US-Tunisia relations in the *third* period of interest is mostly bypassing the *close* view focus that is contained in the set of WikiLeaks Cables, with the exception of the few known *popular* which were repeatedly referenced.

The approach to the relations in the *wide* view focus is adequate in other aspects of Tunisian interest, e.g. Tunisia's stance in history, with some recalling of the American presence in the country, as it is discussed in Kenneth Perkins' basic account.²³ In the two last chapters of the 2014 (updated) edition of his 2005 book, Perkins exposes the events that led to the Revolution,²⁴ with a long list of references, but without specific concern about the US-Tunisian relations.

Safwan M. Masri's²⁵ account (2017) is a reference of Tunisia's historical roots and its modern course as an independent state, with a main interest to build a view about a proper and distinct Tunisian *diversity* and a model state in the Arab world. He is also discussing the Revolution and gives a subjective optimistic perspective for the future.²⁶ Both Perkins and Masri refer to Tunisia and its relations with the World, giving complementary material relevant to the content of the few broader known *popular* Cables.

Carol Migdalovitz²⁷ reviews for the US Congress current issues of US interest about Tunisia, few weeks before Ben Ali's re-election in the 2004 presidential elections and Alexis Arief gives, also for Congress, a detailed overview of Tunisia in transition, two

²³ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. 2nd Edition.

²⁴ Ibidem. 188-260.

²⁵ Safwan M. Masri. *Tunisia. An Arab Anomaly*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017)

²⁶ Masri's account received criticism by Tarek Masoud arguing that the claimed *diversity* is a rather weak element for building uniquely an optimistic perspective for the future. Tarek Masoud. 'Why Tunisia?' *Journal of Democracy*, 29(4) (October 2018), 166-175. Washington: National Endowment for Democracy by John Hopkins University Press. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/review-essay-why-tunisia/>, (Accessed April 22, 2019). For a positive review see Elizabeth Lepro. 'Can Tunisia serve as a model for Arab Spring countries?' *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Summer 2018. <https://www.thecairoreview.com/topics/arab-spring/> (Accessed April 22, 2019)

²⁷ Carol Migdalovitz. 'Tunisia: Current Issues'. CRS Report for Congress, fn. 1: US State Department. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – 2003, Tunisia, February 25, 2004. Also, Ibidem, fn. 13: US Department of State. Background Note: Tunisia, September 2004. <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/06/13/Tunisia%20Current%20Issues.pdf> (Accessed June 21, 2019).

weeks after Ben Ali's ousting, with reference of the past.²⁸ Anju Bali²⁹ presents a detailed account of US-Tunisian relations in the period 1946-1966, in which are included the almost ten first years of Bourguiba's presidency.

Lotfi Ben Rejeb³⁰ concentrates in analysing the period leading to the Revolution with reference to the US-Tunisia relations after Tunisia's Independence, during the long Bourguiba and Ben Ali ruling periods. Despite the special focus on the issue that interests this thesis, the use of the already widely known Cables is limited, taken as secondary sources from reference list. The same is the case in the relevant papers of the collective volume edited by Nouri Gana.³¹

The internal situation of Tunisia, in the *third* period, is reflected in a number of relevant studies. The authors' main concern is the regional focus on the political and economic reasons that led to the Revolution, e.g. the research by Jean-Pierre Filiu,³² Fadhel Kaboub,³³ Tarek Masoud,³⁴ Nadia Marzouki and Meddeb Hamza,³⁵ or Azadeh Shahshahani and Corinna Mullin, who insisted arguing on the generalised perception that the US was *supportive* to Ben Ali's regime.³⁶ Alcinda Honwana,³⁷ studied the

²⁸ Alexis Arief. 'Political Transition in Tunisia'. CRS Report for Congress, February 2, 2011, RS21666. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4d58e6562.html> (Accessed June 23, 2019).

²⁹ Anju Bali. 'Foreign Policy of Tunisia: Transition from Colonial to Post Colonial Era (1946-66)'. PhD Thesis, Centre for West Asian and African Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2009, Chapter IV, 138-168. http://sg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/14517/9/09_chapter%204.pdf (Accessed June 27, 2019).

³⁰ Ben Rejeb, Lotfi, 'United States Policy towards Tunisia: What New Engagement after an Expendable Friendship?' In Nouri Gana (ed.) *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution*. In the same track, Brieg Tomos Powel. 'The stability syndrome: US and EU democracy promotion in Tunisia'. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 14(1) (2009), 57-73. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629380802383562> (Accessed April 22, 2019).

³¹ Nouri Gana (ed.). *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

³² Jean-Pierre Filiu. *The Arab Revolution. Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³³ Kaboub, Fadhel, 'The Making of the Tunisian Revolution'. *Middle East Development Journal*, 5(1) (2013). doi: 10.1142/S179381201350003X. <https://modernmoneynetwork.org/sites/default/files/biblio/Kaboub%2C%202013%2C%20The%20Making%20of%20the%20Tunisian%20Revolution.pdf> (Accessed April 20, 2019).

³⁴ Tarek Masoud. 'Has the Door Closed on Arab Democracy?' *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1) (January 2015), 74-87, Washington: National Endowment for Democracy by John Hopkins University Press. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/has-the-door-closed-on-arab-democracy/>, (Accessed April 22, 2019).

³⁵ Nadia Marzouki and Meddeb Hamza. 'Tunisia. The Struggle for Meanings and Power in Tunisia after the Revolution'. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 8 (2016), 119-130. https://brill-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/view/journals/melg/8/2-3/article-p119_1.xml (Accessed April 22, 2019).

³⁶ Azadeh Shahshahani and Corinna Mullin. 'The legacy of US intervention and the Tunisian revolution: Promises and challenges one year on'. *Interface Journal*, 4(1) (May 2012), 67-101.

social characteristics expressed in the Revolution explaining the leading action of the youth. This group of studies goes beyond the role of WikiLeaks and their mentioning is negligible. Sometimes their views about the Revolution are contrasting, but not in the context of US-Tunisia relations.³⁸ Yahia H. Zoubir³⁹ saw Tunisia as a regional part in a *wide* view of the US interest for MENA and Kim Ghattas⁴⁰ reported just after the Revolution (and Ben Ali's ousting) with reference to a well known (and *popular*) Cable sent in 2009 by US ambassador Robert Godec.⁴¹ The same Cable is the only mentioned by Rym Ayadi, et al.⁴² in a EU Commentary on the Revolution. Years later Emiliano Alessandri, Oz Hassan and Ted Reinert⁴³ recalled, with no reference to the WikiLeaks and always in the *wide* view of the MENA context, that

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.681.1365&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (Accessed April 19, 2019).

³⁷ Alcinda Honwana. 'Youth and the Tunisian Revolution'. Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Social Prevention and Peace Forum (SPPF), September 2011. http://web.archive.ssrg.org/pdfs/Alcinda_Honwana_Youth_and_the_Tunisian_Revolution_September_2011-CPPF_policy%20paper.pdf (Accessed April 19, 2019).

³⁸ The author of this thesis examined two contrasting views about the Tunisian Revolution in: Vasileios Livieratos. 'Optimism and Scepticism about the Tunisian Revolution'. Research tutorial course paper (Tutor: O. Ozavci), Master programme *International Relations in Historical Perspective*, Research track, Graduate School of Humanities, Utrecht University, March 2019.

³⁹ Yahia H. Zoubir. 'Les États-Unis et le Maghreb : primauté de la sécurité et marginalité de la démocratie'. CNRS Editions, *L'Année du Maghreb*, 2005-2006, 563-584. <https://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/169#tocto1n5> (Accessed April 19, 2019). In English: 'American Policy in the Maghreb: The Conquest of a New Region?', Working Paper (WP) 13/2006, Real Instituto Elcano. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/25177/WP%2013,%202006.pdf> (Accessed April 22, 2019).

⁴⁰ Kim Ghattas. 'How does the US view Tunisia's revolt?' *BBC News Washington*, January 16, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12200851> (Accessed April 21, 2019)

⁴¹ Robert F. Godec (Fairfax VA, 1956), a US career diplomat, he was the US ambassador in Tunisia, in his first ambassadorship (May 30, 2006 to July 29, 2009, under the State Secretaries Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton). He dealt with delicate issues and made the Embassy physically present at major scenes of Tunisian government oppression. His famous 2008 Cable about the abuses and corruption of Ben Ali's family is considered by mainstream media as a 'main cause' of the uprising in Tunisia. After Tunisia he served at the US State Department as principal deputy coordinator for counterterrorism in 2009-2012 and as US ambassador to Kenya in 2012-2019. (Source: Matt Bewig. 'US Ambassador to Kenya: Who is Robert Godec?' *AllGov*, October 28, 2012. <http://www.allgov.com/news/appointments-and-registrations/us-ambassador-to-kenya-who-is-robert-godec-121028?news=846064>, Accessed June 5, 2019)

⁴² Rym Ayadi, Silvia Colombo, Maria Cristina Paciello and Nathalie Tocci. 'The Tunisian Revolution. An Opportunity for Democratic Transition'. Mediterranean Prospects project (MEDPRO) Commentary, European Commission, January 24, 2011. <https://www.medpro-foresight.eu/system/files/Tunisian%20revolution-MEDPRO.pdf> (Accessed April 22, 2019).

⁴³ Emiliano Alessandri, Oz Hassan, Ted Reinert. 'U.S. Democracy Promotion from Bush to Obama'. EUSPRING Working Paper 1, April 2015. The German Marshall Fund of the United States; the University of Warwick, UK, 1-32. http://aei.pitt.edu/64170/1/us_dem_promotion_april15 (Accessed April 22, 2019).

“the US-Tunisia relationship was a low priority ... For months after the outbreak of the uprising, the US was at best a tertiary player in Tunisia as historic events unfolded”.⁴⁴

The perception of a presumable *degrade* of US attention on Tunisia concerns also the US stance in Tunisia in the previous, pre-Revolution period 2000-2010. This is evident from the call for upgrading US attention on Tunisia to a higher priority, as it is shown already in 2001 from the request to American foreign policy of a Philadelphia-based entrepreneur “with nearly two decades experience in Tunisia”.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this perception was not the case in the period 2003-2010 as demonstrated by the Cables used in this thesis.

1.3.2. Close view, Cables and popularity

The *wide* (regional) view approach shaded the *close* (local) view that is given in the Cables (PlusD collection⁴⁶) for the studying of the direct US-Tunisia relations. The relations evolved *in situ* in the *third* period depict a non-*degraded* stance of the US in Tunisia, contrary to general belief. Instead, the Cables show an active policy of US pressure for real democratisation and freedoms.

Some questions are then arising, among others posed in this thesis, about, e.g., how much is really known about the major topics of the US-Tunisia relations in the *third* period? What were the quality and the depth of these relations especially after US State secretary Rice’s speech in Cairo in 2005?⁴⁷ Was it the understanding of the two sides the same about the importance and the meaning of what was the *big* and the *little* problems that often arose in the relationship? How true would sound in those few years before the Revolution, the current post in the Tunis US Embassy website

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 15.

⁴⁵ Jerry Sorkin. ‘The Tunisian Model’, Middle East Forum, *Middle East Quarterly*, 8(4) (Fall 2001), 25-29. <https://www.meforum.org/107/the-tunisian-model> (Accessed June 30, 2019).

⁴⁶ According to the WikiLeaks website ‘The WikiLeaks built and curated PlusD collection, is updated from a variety of sources, including leaks, documents released under the Freedom of Information Act’ (Public Library of US Diplomacy. <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/about>, Accessed June 7, 2019). Over the year of its release ‘Cablegate’ (WikiLeaks PlusD) had a huge effect all over the world, being widely acknowledged as a key factor in igniting the ‘Arab Spring’ and altering US diplomatic relations across the globe... A position research discusses the general impact of the WikiLeaks: Edward Hunt. ‘The WikiLeaks Cables: How the United States Exploits the World, in Detail, from an Internal Perspective, 2001–2010’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 30(1) (2019), 70-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2019.1557416> (Accessed April 21, 2019). Also Gabriel J. Michael. ‘Who’s Afraid of WikiLeaks? Missed Opportunities in Political Science Research’, *Review of Policy Research*, 32(2) (March 2015), 175-199. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ropr.12120> (Accessed April 22, 2019).

⁴⁷ US Department of State. ‘Secretary Condoleezza Rice Remarks at American University in Cairo’, June 20, 2005. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>. (Accessed June 4, 2019).

assuring that “positive relations between the US and Tunisia continue from the middle 1800s to the present day”⁴⁸? Answers to the above questions, can be found in the WikiLeaks Cables about Tunisia that were mined and analysed in this thesis.

Almost seventy percent of those Cables were sent during the last four years (2005-2009) of the George W. Bush administration, and the rest almost thirty percent during the first two years (2009-2010) of the Barrack Obama administration.⁴⁹ Each Cable addresses a specific issue in a specific time and all consist of a unique set of primary source data. Arranged in thematic groups and treated systematically, the Cables offer a valuable *close* view of the US-Tunisia relations in an important period of Tunisia’s modern history. The Cables, as potential sources of academic research, were shaded by the great communicative value of the only few but well chosen that became *popular*. Promoted by the mainstream press, these few Cables were soon considered among the causes of the Revolution.⁵⁰

The *popular* Cables quickly found massive circulation creating a dominant perception that the Tunis WikiLeaks (Tunileaks) were only related to the Revolution. This happened, (a) because of the conjuncture of their appearance in late 2010 and of the *touchy* content of some of the most diffused, (b) because there has been a rush in western media to see the Revolution as a direct result of the WikiLeaks, and (c) because the audiences in the West were unfamiliar with the local, real causes of the Revolution.⁵¹

These *popular* Cables have also been selectively transmitted and repeatedly reproduced to support various pro- and con-theories about a so-called *networked* Revolution.⁵² They were the foundation in the majority of studies and reports related to how, according to D. J. Wolover the *distributing* (i.e. the WikiLeaks) and the

⁴⁸ <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/treaty-of-peace-and-friendship-signed-at-tunis-august-28-1797/>

⁴⁹ US Presidents George W. Bush and Barrack Obama were in Office from 2001 to 2009 and from 2009 to 2017 respectively.

⁵⁰ Gregory White. ‘This is the WikiLeaks that sparked the Tunisian Crisis’. *Business Insider*, January 14, 2011. <https://www.businessinsider.com/tunisia-wikileaks-2011-1> (Accessed April 20, 2019).

⁵¹ Fadhel Kaboub. ‘The Making of the Tunisian Revolution’. *Middle East Development Journal*, 5(1) (2013). doi: 10.1142/S179381201350003X. <https://modernmoneynetwork.org/sites/default/files/biblio/Kaboub%2C%202013%2C%20The%20Making%20of%20the%20Tunisian%20Revolution.pdf> (Accessed April 20, 2019).

⁵² David Leigh and Luke Harding. ‘WikiLeaks: Tunisia knew its rulers were debauched. But leaks still had impact’. *The Guardian*, February 2, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/feb/02/wikileaks-exclusive-book-extract> (Accessed April 19, 2019).

mainstream (i.e. journalistic) media have respectively affected the Tunisian movement and “released the relevant information in different cultural perspectives”.⁵³

The approaches to the issue, both academic and journalistic, gave to the WikiLeaks primer role as only impacting the Revolution.⁵⁴ The theoretical and practical merits and weaknesses apart, it was demonstrated that above all the relation of the Wikileaks with the Revolution was more complex than it appeared to be.⁵⁵

The Revolution and the post-Revolution period produced new historiography. The WikiLeaks Tunisian Cables entered into the picture but were never used as a set of primary sources of research in order to approach a *close* view of the US-Tunisia relations in the *third* period of post-Independence Tunisia.

Only few Cables, after becoming *popular*, were considered as part of the causes leading to the Revolution, also used as reference for political acts of justice in post-Revolution Tunisian politics. The few *popular* Cables widely used as being strongly related to the Revolution frequently appeared in the mainstream media. It is a privileged field of journalism retrieved abundantly in the Internet.⁵⁶ Even so, the less known Cables transmitted from Tunis, are still unused.

The research in this thesis shows that these Cables can shed light on the US-Tunisia relations in the turbulent decade before the Revolution and fill a gap in historiography of the period by providing a *close* view on the US-Tunisia relations *in situ*. Therefore,

⁵³ D. J. Wolover. ‘An issue of attribution: The Tunisian revolution, media interaction and agency’, *New Media & Society*, 18(2) (2016), 185-200. <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/doi/pdf/10.1177/1461444814541216> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

⁵⁴ Timothy Garton Ash. ‘Tunisia’s revolution isn’t a product of Twitter or WikiLeaks. But they do help’, *The Guardian*, January 19, 2011. <https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jan/19/tunisia-revolution-twitter-facebook>, (Accessed April 21, 2019)

⁵⁵ Mohamed Zayani. *Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia*. (Oxford: University Press, 2015). Also the relevant reviews by Helton Levy, ‘A review of Mohamed Zayani’s book, Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia’, *LSE Review of Books blog*, of the London School of Economics, LSE March 23, 2016. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/03/21/book-review-networked-publics-and-digital-contention-the-politics-of-everyday-life-in-tunisia-by-mohamed-zayani/>, (Accessed 22 April, 2019) and the review by Philip J. Auter: ‘Mohamed Zayani (2015). Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia’, *Journal of Middle East Media*, 12 (Spring 2016), 97-102. https://jmem.gsu.edu/files/2014/07/JMEM_2016_ENG_Auter_Book_Rev.pdf (Accessed April 19, 2019).

⁵⁶ These are the *popular* Cables, which under generalisation are considered as the WikiLeaks that played principal part in the context of the Revolution (the Tunileaks). Marc Herman. ‘A Tunisian activist describes how Manning’s leaks helped topple a dictator’. *Pacific Standard*, August 23, 2013. <https://psmag.com/news/tunisian-activist-describes-mannings-leaks-helped-topple-dictator-65243>, (Accessed April 22, 2019). Also, Rob Prince. ‘Deconstructing Tunileaks: An Interview with Professor Rob Prince, University of Denver’ in *nawaat.org*, December 20, 2010. In two parts. <https://nawaat.org/portail/2010/12/20/deconstructing-tunileaks-an-interview-with-professor-rob-prince-university-of-denver/> (Accessed April 22, 2019).

any study of the US-Tunisia relations of the *third* period (2000-2010) without consultation and critical use of the majority of the lesser known Cables would be inadequate and can even lead to the drawing of false conclusions.

1.4. Method, concepts and use

This research explores, according to the qualitative methodology, how the US policy behaved regarding Tunisia in the period 2003-2010, before the Revolution. This method accommodated upon the description and interpretation of the US actions and reactions *in situ* following a local focus on the Tunisian internal situation. The tool used to fulfil the qualitative type of the method is the document analysis of the WikiLeaks Cables content. This is done by the proper selection of Cables according to the thematic content of those selected about Tunisia (ca. fifteen percent of the mined almost five hundred in total from the WikiLeaks database), arranged by subject frequency and time coverage.

The qualitative method is based on a conceptual model supporting the analysis as formulated in the following. This model also fits with the need for understanding the entire Tunisian post-Independence periods of US-Tunisia relations.

The US-Tunisia relations were a fundamental subject for Tunisia, based on two main issues in the contexts of the Cold War first and the post-Cold War after: the US foreign policy in the MENA region, and *Bourguibism* in Tunisia's internal affairs. The stability in US-Tunisia relations during the pro-American Bourguiba's times blurred in the late *first* period, because of the alterations in US foreign policy regarding the MENA region.

The unclouded long period in US-Tunisia relations has now come to an end. During Ben Ali's rule, the *second* period relations become more and more conditioned because of the occasionally fluctuating stance of Tunisia in a rapidly changing Arab world, due to the advancing Islamism and the expanding Islamist terrorism.

Consequence of this was that the adaptations of the US policy altered the long-lasting *Bourguibism*'s doctrine of US-Tunisia *trusted friendship* into US view of Tunisia as a country "with which [the US] may have interests in common".⁵⁷ This happened after the 1985 Israeli bombing of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO)

⁵⁷ Jonathan C. Randal. 'Raid Left Scars on US-Tunisia Ties'. *Washington Post*, March 5 1987. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000605360002-3.pdf> (Accessed June 23, 2019).

headquarters in Tunis. However, common necessities kept US-Tunisia relations in a generally privileged level during its *second* post-Independence period (1987-2000). This was the result of the US regional interest for keeping stability in the MENA region, disturbed by the rising Arab unquiet, with Tunisia a reliable partner *may having common interests*. On the other hand, it was the result of Ben Ali's policy to accommodate this US regional interest for receiving in return a tacit tolerance from the US in his increasing ambition of establishing a personal authoritarian regime. Things changed after September 11 and the consequent US headed wars in Afghanistan (started on October 7, 2001) and Iraq (started on March 19, 2003). These events misbalanced the status of the US policy and its *wide* view on the MENA region and put, as a result, Ben Ali's regime in *political embarrassment* regarding US-Tunisia relations.

1.4.1. Conceptual model of relations

The US-Tunisia relations are a variable dependent on the changes in time of a pair (in grand part) of independent variables: (a) the US foreign policy view, and (b) the Tunisia's internal affairs. The three periods of the post-Independence Tunisia, as examined in academic historiography and journalism, can be formatted according to the model of US-Tunisia relations, as following:

- (i) The *first* period (1957-1987) is examined according to the pair of independent variables (a) and (b) in the context of the Cold War: (a) The US foreign policy of a *wide* view focus on MENA region with Tunisia a part of it, and (b) *Bourguibism* and its stance in the Arab world of rising nationalisms.
- (ii) The *second* period (1987-2000) is examined in the context of the post-Cold War, according to the pair of independent variables (a) and (b), the first remained unchanged and the second changed due to Ben Ali's own policy, resulting: (a) as in (i), and (b) The transforming *Bourguibism* in a changing Arab world of rising Islamism.
- (iii) The *third* period (2000-2010) is examined in historiography in the context of the post-September 11 World, according to the pair of independent variables (a) and (b), of which the first slightly changed (comparing to the two previous periods) due to the consideration of the few selected *popular* WikiLeaks, and the second totally changed, resulting: (a) The US foreign policy of a *wide* view focus on MENA region with Tunisia a part of it, with only a glimpse of a *close* view focused on Tunisia (due to the

popular Cables), and (b) The corrupted and oppressing Ben Ali regime in a rapidly changing Arab world of rising Islamism and the threat of Islamist terrorism.

In this thesis, the *third* period being the core of the research, the model of US-Tunisia relations is adapted as following:

(iv) The *third* period is examined, in the context of the post-September 11 World, using the Cables selected for the research according to the variables (a) and (b), the first totally changed due to the use of Cables, the second remaining unchanged: (a) The US foreign policy of a *close* view focus on Tunisia, due to the use of Cables, and (b) as in (iii).

This conceptual model about the US-Tunisia relations helps the distinction of approaching the *third* period in the terms of existing historiography and in the terms of the tools of the qualitative method followed in this research. This, supports the answering of the research question on whether the US focus on Tunisia was *degraded* by the US in 2003-2010 or, on the contrary, the US was active *in situ* and involved in the issues of democratisation, human rights and press freedom in Tunisia.

1.5. Primary sources provide answers

Despite the generally acknowledged fact that the few known *popular* WikiLeaks Cables played a presumably direct⁵⁸ or indirect⁵⁹ role in the Revolution, it is still true that, as it is argued in this thesis, from the whole relevant WikiLeaks set, only a very limited amount of Cables has been used so far. These few (but *popular*) were not focused on the US-Tunisia relations, which is the main subject of this research. The approach to the *close* view of the US-Tunisia relations, as evolved *in situ* in the period 2003-2010, makes relevant the use of the Tunis Cables as primary sources of data.

The use of a targeted set of Cables has not yet been sufficiently researched in the academic historiography and journalism about the US-Tunisia relations. On the contrary the few *popular* Cables are referenced in historiography as sources related to

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Dickinson. 'The First WikiLeaks Revolution?' *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/13/the-first-wikileaks-revolution/> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

⁵⁹ Colin Delany. 'How Social Media Accelerated Tunisia's Revolution: An Inside View', *HuffPost*, February 13, 2011; updated May 25, 2011. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-social-media-accelera_b_821497 (Accessed April 21, 2019).

the Revolution.⁶⁰ This is the reason for the contrasting results found in standard historiography in respect to those of this thesis.

Focusing on the US-Tunisia relations during the *third* post-Independence period of Tunisia's history the research question of the thesis aims to reveal that: Despite the widespread view that the US was not interested on, or reacted to, the depressing situation in Tunisia, *degrading* thus its active presence in the country, the Cables demonstrate the opposite: an intense and influencing US activity *in situ* during the period of interest of this study (2003-2010) in defending human rights and freedoms. Thus, the positive answer of the second part of hypothesis on whether the Cables merely provide an amorphous set of information or whether they allow the mining of new information resulting to new knowledge, contrasts the established views making the Cables important input in academic research.

The new knowledge obtained from the inquiry on the Cables concerning the actions and reactions by the US and the Tunisian government on important, but lesser known events and crises during the 2000s, gives new insight to the US-Tunisia relations. To achieve answering the aim of the thesis, the state of the US-Tunisia relations in the *first* and *second* periods is overviewed, followed by the analysis of how the US reacted and acted in the *third* period before the Revolution.

The aim of the thesis is to show, through selected topics mined from the lesser-known and so far unused Cables, that the US interest on Tunisia in the *third* period was not at all *degraded* or *supportive* to a corrupted regime. It was active and consistent with emphasis in the interrelated human rights and press freedom issues, in contrast to the general widespread view. This proves that the Cables are compulsory primary sources for the study of the ten years period before the Revolution.

⁶⁰ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia: What New Engagement after an Expendable 'Friendship'?' In Nouri Gana (ed.) *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution*.

2. FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE 21ST CENTURY

In order to effectively research the *third* period (2000-2010) it is necessary to make a historical overview of US-Tunisian relations starting from the late 19th century, when the first official contacts took place, continuing to the twentieth century and seeing how the relations were forged during the *first* and *second* periods (1957-1987 and 1987-2000). The end of these periods of post-Independence Tunisia is marked by Bourguiba's death in April 6, 2000.

The following overview, mainly based on Lotfi Ben Rejeb⁶¹ and Kenneth Perkins,⁶² outlines Bourguiba's internal and foreign policies (*Bourguibism*), *vis-à-vis* the regional US focus on MENA, during the *first* period.

Tunisia, ruled since 1705 by the Husaynid dynasty⁶³ under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire, became a French protectorate in 1881.⁶⁴ Tunisians opposed from the beginning the French, but their opposition lost intensity after the end of the First World War. It was then, when the pressure on the protectorate was smoothed due to the war and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1919 ending the Tunisian aspirations for self-determination.⁶⁵ The Interwar period was determinant for the political emancipation of a new Tunisian leading-class, which created the conditions for the country's Independence. A new inspired generation that had studied in France was influenced by the political ideas prevailing in Europe.⁶⁶

Coming back home these young Tunisians contributed to the profound changes in all parts of the society, in the working class, the press, in arts and the emancipation of

⁶¹ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia: What New Engagement after an Expendable Friendship?' In Nouri Gana (ed.). *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*.

⁶² Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. 2nd Edition, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15-43.

⁶³ Safwan M. Masri. *Tunisia. An Arab Anomaly*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 124, 141, 144. The Husaynid dynasty, of Cretan-Turkish origin, according to Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, Bourguiba "in his speeches frequently claimed that the Husaynids and the political class of mamluk origins were not really Tunisians, often referring to them as Greeks. For this reasons, the history of the Husaynid family was taboo until recently". Julia A. Clancy-Smith. *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900*. California World History Library, (University of California Press, 2011), fn. 110.

⁶⁴ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 15-43.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 79-80.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 79-94.

women, in creating political parties and in developing secularism.⁶⁷ Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) was among them. He returned in Tunis with a law-degree from France in 1927, playing an active role in the second part of the Interwar period, in the 1930s.

The rising personality in a new political party (the Neo-Dustur⁶⁸), Bourguiba,

“quite familiar with the French left from his student days in Paris, he saw in *Léon Blum*’s [69] government genuine prospects for ameliorating the political and economic situation in the protectorate. ... he omitted explicitly calling for independence and endorsed the concept of a gradual political evolution that safeguarded legitimate French interests”.⁷⁰

In the years of the Second World War, Bourguiba suffered adventures due to suspicions for having contacts with the Axis. The evidence provided about his loyalty by US diplomats, thanks to contacts with Bourguiba’s wife and son, while he was a *Vichy* regime prisoner, shielded him from French reprisal.⁷¹ L. Carl Brown notices that Bourguiba’s relations with the Americans may be said to begin with Hooker Doolittle, the US consul-general in Tunis from 1941 to 1943.⁷²

In 1943, after being the scene of decisive battles during the Second World War, Tunisia was liberated by Allied forces as part of *Operation Torch*, the US leaving behind a cemetery and memorial, near Carthage, holding nearly 3,000 US military dead.⁷³

2.1. Leading actor

After the end of the Second World War, Tunisia was discovered by American companies that held a majority interest in the *Société Nord-Africaine des Pétroles*, prospecting for oil.⁷⁴ US diplomats also promoted the profitability of investments in agriculture, irrigation projects, small factories, and tourism. However, the *colons*⁷⁵

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 95-104.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 82-95 (about the Dustur Party) and 101-109 (about the Neo-Dustur Party).

⁶⁹ *Léon Blum, André*. French Prime Minister (1936-1937, 1938); Prime Minister and Foreign Minister (1946-1947).

⁷⁰ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 103.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 113.

⁷² L. Carl Brown. ‘Mon ami Hooker Doolittle. Early American Contacts with Habib Bourguiba’. Middle East Institute, translated from French in English. Originally a chapter in *Habib Bourguiba: La Trace et L’heritage*, Michael Camau and Vincent Geisser (eds), (Editions Karthala, Paris, 2004), 407-428. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/46329/doc508.pdf> (Accessed June 29, 2019).

⁷³ Alexis Arief. ‘Political Transition in Tunisia’. CRS Report for Congress, 7.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 127.

⁷⁵ The French settlers in Tunisia.

and many French across the Mediterranean distrusted American business initiatives across North Africa, suspecting Tunisians for advancing proper interests with the US.⁷⁶ It was that time, when Bourguiba became the real protagonist in Tunisian politics. With his internal alliances, the personal attraction exercised on the people in rural areas, his intentional absences from the country, sensed by the people, Bourguiba succeeded to be followed and lead the pressure to France for Independence in the 1950s.⁷⁷

A talented negotiator he was moving with ease in front and behind the curtains of politics facing, in plain Cold War, internal pressures and communist agitations imported from France.⁷⁸ Bourguiba's first visit to the US was in December 1946 meeting the US State secretary Dean Acheson⁷⁹ without promises or support.⁸⁰ In 1951 he accompanied in the US the Tunisian labour-leader Farhat Hached,⁸¹ invited by the American federation of labour.

The intention of the two Tunisian political partners was to convince the Americans for the possibility of trade unionism to coexist with nationalism in colonial societies, both men emphasising their moderation, anticommunism and readiness for negotiations with France.⁸² The visit to the US was aimed at leveraging the American anti-colonial feelings. Even though, due to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) being a fresh US achievement in the context of the Cold War, the Americans chose to respect the partnership with France. They considered the aspirations of the colonies for independence only as *second category concern for the US*, and the Tunisian case as *France's internal affair*.⁸³

⁷⁶ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 127-128.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 113.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 115.

⁷⁹ In office 1945-1947, under the US president Harry Truman.

⁸⁰ Anju Bali. 'Foreign Policy of Tunisia: Transition from Colonial to Post Colonial Era (1946-66)'. PhD Thesis, Centre for West Asian and African Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2009, Chapter IV, 141.
http://sg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/14517/9/09_chapter%204.pdf (Accessed June 27, 2019).

⁸¹ Farhat Hached (1914-1952). He established the Tunisian labour union UGTT in 1946, assassinated in 1952. See Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 117. For the 1951 Hached's visit with Bourguiba in the US, see US Department of State. 'Memorandum of Conversation by the Deputy Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs (Samuel Kopper)'. Office of the Historian, October 9-10, 1951. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v05/d777>. (Accessed June 30, 2019).

⁸² Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 126.

⁸³ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia: What New Engagement after an Expendable Friendship?', 82, fn.: A. Khaled, *Documents Secrets du 2e Bureau*, STD, Tunis, 1983, 110-118.

In 1952-1953 the US was against a United Nations (UN) resolution accusing the French of repression in Tunisia and another asking France to accept Tunisian autonomy, with the USSR supporting both.⁸⁴ Only two years before the Independence, *Mendès-France*⁸⁵ started talking with Bourguiba. The French leader was convinced that:

“a policy can be directed against Bourguiba... or it can be formulated with Bourguiba... It is inconceivable without Bourguiba”.⁸⁶

2.2. Choosing the West

With the Independence in 1956 and the proclamation of the Republic in 1957 Bourguiba becomes the first prime minister of independent Tunisia, and president of the country from 1957 until his removal for *health reasons* in 1987.⁸⁷ As Kenneth Perkins underlines:

“His realistic strategies dominated the anti-colonial movement, while his aggressively modernist and staunchly secularist philosophy shaped policy making in postcolonial Tunisia”.⁸⁸

From the beginning of Bourguiba’s rule, practically in 1956, the US supported Tunisia’s new course. The Tunis US Embassy webpage proudly remembers today an agreement, the first in a long series for economic and technical support, signed on March 1957.⁸⁹ Recalling also the thirty-five years presence in the country of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), financing agriculture and being the major partner in the construction of the Tunis/Carthage airport and in infrastructures like e.g. the Oued Nebhana Dam, pipeline and irrigation, highways and bridges, water supply for urban areas.⁹⁰

Soon after Tunisia’s declaration of Independence, Bourguiba did not spare voicing and writing his firm alignment with the West, his willingness to join NATO, his

⁸⁴ Ibidem, 82.

⁸⁵ *Mendès France, Pierre*. French Prime minister and Foreign affairs minister (1954-1955).

⁸⁶ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 130, fn.: Jean François Martin. *La Tunisie de ferry à Bourguiba*, (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 1993), 163.

⁸⁷ Douglas Johnson. ‘Habib Bourguiba’. *The Guardian*, April 7, 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/new/2000/apr/07/guardianobituaries1> (Accessed June 30, 2019).

⁸⁸ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, xiii.

⁸⁹ <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/>, (Accessed April 18, 2019).

⁹⁰ <https://www.usaid.gov/tunisia> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

opposition to the Non-Aligned Movement⁹¹ and his disregard to the Arab League⁹² (he became a member soon later). His pro-West⁹³ and anti-Communist⁹⁴ positions were clearly displayed and redisplayed since the very beginning of his rule.

Bourguiba remained faithful to his pro-West position during the entire Cold War period, considering the Mediterranean as a bridge between North Africa and Western Europe, reaching towards America.⁹⁵ However, Tunisia never succeeded to become a NATO member, the US offering instead to Bourguiba security guarantees and after the coup attempt against him in 1958, together with France, tripled military support.⁹⁶ Bourguiba was liberal-driven, more than any other leader in the Arab world, in his social policies, particularly in regard to women's rights, education and housing for all. His *Bourguibism* is described on the basis of a *kind of democracy... to Tunisian type* as Bourguiba himself displays in his *Tunisian Way*.⁹⁷

2.2.1. US: the close friend

The US assistance to Tunisia in the 1960s, in the form of economic and technical aid, was beneficial for the country, because of the balanced losses from the mass departure of skilled Europeans and the flight of capital the first years of Independence. The support, thus, to Bourguiba from presidents Eisenhower first and Kennedy after was the praise and reward for his staying at the US side. Tunisian economy was lifting up and Bourguiba expressed optimism for the US policy that encouraged his aspirations for *coming closer* to the West, as acclaimed by

⁹¹ The movement of the Non-Aligned countries in the context of the Cold War decided at Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955. <https://mnoal.org> (Accessed June 17, 2019).

⁹² The Arab League is a regional organisation bringing together all Arab countries established in 1945. EU Strategic Communications. 'League of Arab States (LAS)', European External Action Service, August 8, 2016. https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/league-arab-states-las/7933/league-arab-states-las_en (Accessed June 30, 2019).

⁹³ Tillman Durdin. 'Tunisian Premier Again Backs West; Bourguiba Rejects Position of Neutrality Expressed at Cairo Conference'. *The New York Times*, March 3, 1957. <https://www.nytimes.com/1957/03/03/archives/Tunisian-premier-again-backs-west-bourguiba-rejects-position-of.html> (Accessed June 28, 2019)

⁹⁴ Habib Bourguiba. 'Nationalism: Antidote to Communism', *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 1957. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/1957-07-01/nationalism-anidote-communism> (Accessed June 28, 2019).

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia...', 84, fn.: *The New York Times*, August 16, 1958; *Associated Press*, 'Tunisia Supplied with US Arms', August 15, 1958.

⁹⁷ Habib Bourguiba. 'The Tunisian Way', *Foreign Affairs*, April 1, 1966. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/1966-04-01/tunisian-way> (Accessed June 28, 2019)

the American mainstream press.⁹⁸ In his visit to Washington in May 1961, Bourguiba assured Kennedy and the Congress about his foreign and internal policies convincingly presenting to the Americans his efforts for a long development programme, asking the US for aid.⁹⁹

The US responded positively for long-term loans, “toying with the idea of choosing Tunisia as a *model* for massive economic aid”¹⁰⁰ as it was also promoted by the American press. Tunisia soon hosted a contingent of the US Peace Corps in 1961. This is still remembered by the Americans, with Tunisia being the first Arab country to welcome, upon request, 2,382 Americans who joined their endeavours with Tunisians to improve the infrastructures of the country the thirty-four years to come.¹⁰¹

The deadly short battle in Bizerte (July 19-23, 1961) between the French military defending their base, still under their command, and the attacking armed Tunisian units and voluntaries resulted six hundred dead and over a thousand wounded.

Leon Carl Brown displays the reasons of this serious conflict in a nine pages letter answering his own questions on the issue.¹⁰² The US took the French side, to Bourguiba’s great disappointment, avoiding pressure against the NATO ally, urging for bilateral talks between the two parties; the US counterbalanced the issue by fulfilling the promised aid to Tunis.¹⁰³

In the 1960s, Bourguiba faithful to his pro-West positions in foreign policy developed his *Realpolitik* in straight confrontation with Nasser’s ambitions for the leadership in the Arab world, especially regarding the Palestinian issue.¹⁰⁴ He sustained the US-Tunisian relations after the escalation of the Vietnam War in 1964 and after the Six

⁹⁸ Anju Bali. ‘Foreing Policy of Tunisia: Transition from Colonial to Post Colonial Era (1946-66)’, 157.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, 158.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, 159.

¹⁰¹ <https://www.usaid.gov/tunisia> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

¹⁰² L. Carl Brown. ‘The Bizerte Affair’. Letter addressed to Richard H. Nolte, Institute of Current World Affairs in July 31, 1961. <http://www.icwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LCB-7.pdf> (Accessed June 30, 2019).

¹⁰³ Anju Bali. ‘Foreing Policy of Tunisia: Transition ...’, 160.

¹⁰⁴ Stuart E. Brown. ‘Tunisia and the Arab League (1956-1966)’ MA Thesis, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, February, 1969. http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/webclient/StreamGate?folder_id=0&dvs=1562529057490~794 (Accessed June 29, 2019).

Days War in 1967, keeping intact relations with (West) Germany, while linking his diplomacy with Israel in 1965.¹⁰⁵

In the 1970s Bourguiba's foreign policy came closer to the Arab world, supporting the Arabs in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, but this support remained small.¹⁰⁶ In January 1974, Libya's Gaddafi attempted to disturb the US-Tunisian relations flattering Bourguiba with his opportunistic proposal for the union of the two neighbouring countries. NATO opposed strongly keeping Bourguiba far away from Gaddafi's calculations.¹⁰⁷

2.2.2. *Fragility clouds and the fall*

After the signing of the Camp David Accords, in 1978, Tunisia came closer to the Arab world, the Arab League's headquarters moving from Cairo to Tunis.¹⁰⁸ Gaddafi continued being interested in Tunisia by organising a destabilising attack against Gafsa, known for its mines. In 1981, Reagan's decision to support Tunisia militarily resulted to the acquisition of costly (and possibly unsuitable) military material in the next years, criticised for burdening the weak Tunisian economy.¹⁰⁹ The 1982 Israeli invasion in Lebanon complicated the Tunisian stance in the Arab world and its relations with the US. The move to Tunis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), rumoured for having been engineered by the US, was a Bourguiba's reluctant decision. He feared that this move would create difficulties for Tunisia's tourism industry. He preferred keeping Tunisia distant from a thorny problem as was the Palestine question, knowing how important was for him to appease the West, and especially the US, *vis-à-vis* Israel.¹¹⁰ During Bourguiba's visit to Washington in August 1985 Gaddafi expelled out of Libya thousands of Tunisian workers intending once again to destabilise Tunisia. Bourguiba reacted by further enforcing military association with the US.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia...', 84.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, fn: T. Belkhdja, *Les trois décennies Bourguiba: témoignage*, (Paris: Publisud, 1998), 145.

¹⁰⁸ Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia. An Arab Anomaly*, 206.

¹⁰⁹ Anju Bali. 'Foreign Policy of Tunisia: Transition ...', 161.

¹¹⁰ Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia. An Arab Anomaly*, 206.

¹¹¹ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia...', 84 and 85, fn: *Facts on File*, 1985, 724.

The Israeli bombing of PLO headquarters in Tunis on October 1, 1985 in front of the presidential palace was a shock for Bourguiba. Sixty-eight Palestinians and Tunisians were killed in the attack with president Reagan considering the raid as a legitimate action, announcing his veto to any denouncing of Israel in the UN. Bourguiba called the US ambassador to protest,¹¹² and said that he was feeling,

“like a man who never doubted the loyalty of his wife but who, discovering her infidelity after fifty years of union, wonders if it has ever been faithful to him”.¹¹³

To Bourguiba’s disappointment as having been *sacrificed* by the US, an anti-American consensus arises in Tunisia added to the general malaise of the country, which felt the imminent end of Bourguiba’s era.¹¹⁴ This was almost preannounced, a week after the Israeli air raid by *The New York Times* reporting confidential information that if Bourguiba choose stopping relations with the US is running the risk to be overthrown.¹¹⁵ Tunisian Prime minister said that he was *mistaken* in giving confidence to US security promises.¹¹⁶

For the next two years leading to Bourguiba’s fall, anti-American feelings were growing in Tunisia, the criticism coming from any part, secularist and Islamist, all the reactions reported regularly by the top American newspapers.¹¹⁷ The figure of the *sacrificed* or *consumable* friend prevailed now for Bourguiba, in weak health and with unstable political authority.

Desperate, he tried contacts with the USSR and invited Gorbachev to visit Tunis.¹¹⁸ Reagan tried to repair relations with the Tunisian government but according to US diplomacy in Tunis “Tunisia and the US are no longer friends; just countries with only common interests”¹¹⁹.

2.3. Searching for a new pace

After Bourguiba’s deposal in 1987, his successor, Ben Ali, invited in September 1988 the major political forces of the country agreeing on a *national pact*

¹¹² Ibidem, 85.

¹¹³ Ibidem, fn: *Le Quotidien de Paris*, October 4, 1985.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem, 85.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem, fn: *The New York Times*, October 7, 1985.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, fn.: *Le Monde*, Novembre 6, 1985.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, fn: *The New York Times*, November 7, 1985.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, fn: *La Presse de Tunisie*, December 19 1985; February 21 and 26 1986; April 19 1986.

¹¹⁹ Jonathan C. Randal. ‘Raid Left Scars on US-Tunisia Ties’. *Washington Post*, March 5 1987.

aimed at enforcing unity, ensuring basic political freedoms and assuring elections for a new parliament.¹²⁰ Alexis Arief gives an account of Ben Ali's presidency, from which some topics of the *third* period of post-Independence Tunisia (1987-2000) are overviewed.

The euphoria stemming from the *liberation* of internal politics in the late 1980s gave soon place to tensions with moderate Islamism in early 1990s, with Ben Ali starting to enforce his power towards authoritarian models of governance. He was encouraging a growing rule of the security forces and of party-referenced government. He projected the restriction of freedoms and human rights to safeguard his personal power, degenerated to a corruptive and repressing regime in the 2000s.

The major *nightmare* of Ben Ali's regime, used to promote restrictions on human rights and press freedom, was the raising Islamism and augmenting terrorism, pointing to the example of the Civil War in neighbouring Algeria. His policy of facing the rising Islamism assured him the positive predisposition of Tunisia's Western allies, always looking with scepticism, since the Iranian Revolution, at the political resurgence of Islam.¹²¹

This situation combined with the expanding discontent, due to deficiencies in economy, made the management of Tunisian internal affairs a major reason of discomfort for Ben Ali and his government.¹²²

Ben Ali was almost neutral in the 1991 Gulf War, repeating the same stance in the US headed invasion of Iraq in 2003. The relations with Palestinians echoed his special contacts with the Israelis. In 2000, he praised Ariel Sharon for his withdrawal from the Gaza Strip; the then Israeli Foreign minister (Tunisia-born) attended in Tunis the World Summit on Information Society, as Israel's delegate Communication minister, in 2005¹²³.

Tunisian ties with European Union (EU) were reflected on the sixty percent of Tunisian commercial exchanges with Europe. The agreements signed in 1995 went into effect in the late 2000s, still ongoing in the 2010s.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/ben-ali.htm>

¹²¹ Keneth Perkins. 'Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics'. In Nouri Gana (ed.) *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Chapter 2, (Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 71).

¹²² Alexis Arief. 'Political Transition in Tunisia', 22-26.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 27.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*.

During the *second* period of post-Independence Tunisia, Ben Ali used the Islamism threat, domestic and foreign (especially present in Tunisia's neighbourhood) to eliminate the *national pact* agreed with opposition in 1988, strengthening his personal political *stranglehold* on the country.

3. TEN YEARS BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

The *third* period of Tunisia's post-Independence history, covers the decade from 2000 to the Revolution. The American regional focus on MENA continued dominant in the US foreign policy also in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the following US headed invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Academic historiography and journalism dealing with the Tunisian events after the Revolution followed the same analysis on the US impact on the events, presumably *degraded*, as they did for the 2000s and before.

Only few widely known *popular* Cables were adding to the *wide* view a limited US local focus on the situation in Tunisia *per se*. Among those *popular* Cables, three are indicative of the US concern: two reporting on the worrying situation that the country has come to from the unbridled corruption of Ben Ali and his family and the repressive practices of the Tunisian government.¹²⁵ The other, projecting Ben Ali's aspirations in the world of Information,¹²⁶ which was disproportional when considering the precarious situation of the country.

In this chapter, is its discussed the perception about a presumed *degrade* of the US interest for Tunisia in its *third* post-Independence period. The few widely known *popular* Cables used were those concerning issues potentially directly related or linked to the Revolution and not to the period 2000-2010. The vast majority of Cables that concern US-Tunisian relations *per se* remained unused and practically unknown, inside the ample WikiLeaks databases.

3.1. *Wide* view and input

Part of academic historiography on the *third* period attempted to explain the unrest focusing on the political and socio-economic reasons that led to the uprising, independently of the changes in US-Tunisia relations of this period.

¹²⁵ WikiLeaks. 'Corruption in Tunisia: What's Yours is Mine', June 23, 2008. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS679_a.html (Accessed May 20, 2019)

¹²⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Microsoft Inks Agreement with GoT', September 22, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2424_a.html (Accessed March 18, 2019).

Other part approached these relations in the context of the US policy implemented to the Arab world, especially focused on the MENA region, in the aftermath of the September 11.

Sources of this part of academic research were the international media reporting on the situation in Tunisia at that period, according to: (a) the news released by the US and the Tunisian governments, obviously after selection,¹²⁷ (b) the studies of international organisations monitoring and evaluating the political and socio-economic performance of the countries, (c) the work of journalists and international press agencies,¹²⁸ (d) the activism of the international organisations dealing with human rights and press freedom,¹²⁹ and (e) in some cases the researchers' personal collection of data *in situ*, mainly by contacting and interviewing local people.¹³⁰ The above sources, mainly inhomogeneous and fragmented, were not all concerned about the US-Tunisia relations.

Other sources were also the US official documents that offer aspects about the US-Tunisia relations. Issued by the US government, mainly (but not exclusively) the Department of State in the course of the *third* period was of limited (if not restricted) circulation.

Their origins were again heterogeneous and fragmented since the texts were written in different services, for different recipients, without a unique reference and eventually for fulfilling different purposes. This is visible in the relevant documents available in the websites of the Department of State¹³¹ or posted in other official websites of the US administration.¹³²

¹²⁷ *Voice of America*. <https://editorials.voa.gov/s?k=Tunisia&tab=all&pi=1&r=any&pp=10> (Accessed April 20, 2019).

¹²⁸ For example the *Associated Press*, the *Agence France-Press*, and others; Carol Migdalovitz. 'Tunisia: Current Issues'. CRS Report for Congress, October 15, 2004.

¹²⁹ For example the Reporters without Borders (RSF), Amnesty International, and others; Carol Migdalovitz. 'Tunisia: Current Issues'. CRS Report for Congress.

¹³⁰ Mohamed Zayani. *Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia*.

¹³¹ The country page for Tunisia in the US Department of State website: <https://www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/ts/> (Accessed April 19, 2019). For example in the current documents relevant to Tunisia issued by US Dept of State or the Tunis US Embassy. Collateral sources (from November 2002 to February 2011) reflect relevant US government views, e.g., the web pages of the US State Department selected out of fifty in total, from: https://findit.state.gov/search?affiliate=dos_stategov&page=1&query=Tunisia&utf8=& and the *Voice of America* Editorials, selected out of the twenty-five from a total of 126 concerning Tunisia (2002-2018) from: <https://editorials.voa.gov/s?k=Tunisia&tab=all&pi=1&r=any&pp=10> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

¹³² Carol Migdalovitz. 'Tunisia: Current Issues'. CRS Report for Congress, October 15, 2004. Also, Alexis Arief. 'Political Transition in Tunisia'. CRS Report for Congress, February 2, 2011.

3.2. Perceptions and reality

The post-Revolution historiography created a perception of a US *degraded* interest about the crisis in Tunisia during the *third* period. This perception was based on available sources reflecting the US foreign policy focus on the MENA region, using also few *popular* Cables containing a US *close* view on Tunisia.

The example of the following quotation gives evidence of this negative perception about the US, after Tunisia received the ovation from the US, following Ben Ali's ousting:

“The US government's vibrant encouragement to the Tunisian people is welcome yet ironic considering its long-standing support of Tunisia's previous autocrats and its concomitant negligence of people's aspirations to democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and dignity”.¹³³

The quotation refers to president Barack Obama's hail to the Revolution in his State of the Union address on January 26, 2011, when he praises for “the will of the people, proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator”¹³⁴. In this address Obama stated clearly “the US stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people”¹³⁵.

US State secretary Hillary Clinton followed in the same line, shortly after in Tunis, repeating the hope for a model democracy in the post-Revolution period. Her address was denounced as representative of “US hypocrisy”.¹³⁶

The argument about this *hypocrisy*, which is widespread in historiography about US-Tunisia relations in the 2000s, is based on the interpretations about the *wide* view approach to the US foreign policy focus on the MENA region, including Tunisia as a part.

The perception about a presumed US *negligence of people's aspirations to democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and dignity*¹³⁷ for the internal affairs of Tunisia could possibly be the case during the *first* and the *second* Tunisian post-Independence periods (1957-

¹³³ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. ‘United States Policy towards Tunisia...’, 81.

¹³⁴ State of the Union address. ‘Barack Obama's State of the Union address – full text’. *The Guardian*, January 26, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/26/barack-obama-address-full-text> (Accessed June 27, 2019)

¹³⁵ Ibidem.

¹³⁶ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. ‘United States Policy towards Tunisia...’, 81, fn.: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, ‘Town Hall Meeting in Tunis, Tunisia,’ US Department of State, March 17, 2011. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/03/20110318093629su2.725947e-02.html#axz2UvmntqIM>.

¹³⁷ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. ‘United States Policy towards Tunisia...’, 81.

2000). However, this perception does not correspond to reality in the *third* period (2000-2010), as the Cables prove in this thesis. To insist on the opposite, as repeatedly alleged in the press,¹³⁸ seems like a fixation based on the persistence about a “US long-standing support of Tunisia’s previous autocrats.”¹³⁹

Omissions in the narrative of events related to the *third* period may possibly reinforce such perception. This, e.g., is the case of the official US post on the pages of the Tunis US Embassy website: a relevant account about the history of US-Tunisia relations appearing to stop in 2002 only to restart after the Revolution, giving the impression of a *degrade* of a US focus on Tunisia after 2002.¹⁴⁰

3.2.1. Interest degraded?

This impression of a *degrade*, given by the Tunis US Embassy’s post¹⁴¹ for the period 2002 to the Revolution, appearing to suddenly restart after, seems to have only a diplomatic function: neglecting today its public appearance in the period of the great social unrest in Tunisia, the US diplomacy possibly wished to overcome the country’s stressing conditions before the Revolution. But how realistic was this apparent *degrade* of the US interest in Tunisia in that period? Was the US really inactive and indifferent about the events that evolved in the period of the presumed *degrading*? The inclusion in the narration of US-Tunisia relations of that period of few *popular* WikiLeaks Cables is not enough to unveil the reality of these relations in the *third* period, *in situ*.

In any case, 2002 (the year after September 11) seems to be significant for the American view on Tunisia because of the deadly terrorist attack against the Synagogue in the island of Djerba, considered Al-Qaeda’s “first *success* outside of

¹³⁸ Shahshahani, Azadeh and Corinna Mullin, ‘The legacy of US intervention and the Tunisian revolution: Promises and challenges one year on’. *Interface Journal*, 4(1) (May 2012), 67-101. Also, Ian Black. ‘An uncriticised success’, *The Guardian*, November 8, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/08/ianblack> (Accessed June 29, 2019).

¹³⁹ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. ‘United States Policy towards Tunisia...’, 81.

¹⁴⁰ US Tunis Embassy. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/> (Accessed April 18, 2019).

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

Asia”¹⁴². In the same year the US Department of State issued a lengthy report on the state of Tunisia’s internal affairs.¹⁴³

3.3. Cables giving the *close* view

In order to comprehend the US stance in Tunisia in the *third* period, and the validity or not of the perception of US attention on Tunisia as *degraded*, the study of the WikiLeaks Tunis Cables is necessary. This database of Cables contains primary sources about the US-Tunisia relations in the period of concern.

The Cables provide many homogeneous and continuous sets of texts written by the same service based at the same place (the Tunis US Embassy), for the same recipient (the US Department of State and its representations abroad), with unique reference (the diplomatic standardisation) and for the service of the same purpose (the US-Tunisia diplomatic relations).

A set of WikiLeaks Cables related to Tunisia, counting about five hundred, was available for new research in order to gain a *close* view on what was going on *in situ* regarding US-Tunisia relations in 2003 to 2010 and to answer the research question of this thesis.

The Tunis Cables found in the media a privileged field of extensive circulation. Nevertheless not many of them were used and reused by journalists who selected only few but *touchy* from the total set (those we call *popular*). The relation of the Cables with the Revolution, promoted in the media (also discussed in academic research), was based thus on the content of only a few Cables,¹⁴⁴ the rest of the many hundreds remaining unused. Promoted by the social media in Tunisia (and abroad) the few Cables, *popular* among the local population,¹⁴⁵ reported and commented on

¹⁴² The attack claimed by Al-Qaeda left twenty-one dead. Giles Tremieth (and reporting team). ‘Deadly attack keeps world in alert’. *The Guardian*, September 4, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/04/september11.usa>. (Accessed June 21, 2019).

¹⁴³ US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18290.htm> (Accessed April 19, 2019).

¹⁴⁴ Judy Bachrach, ‘WIKIHISTORY: Did the Leaks Inspire the Arab Spring?’ *World Affairs*, 174(2) (July/August 2011), 35-44. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41290331?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents, (Accessed April 20, 2019).

¹⁴⁵ It is worth remembering that the few selected WikiLeaks majorly used by the media so far, with regard to the Revolution, have been translated into French from English (by the influencing Tunisian website [nawaat.org](https://nawaat.org/portail/) (<https://nawaat.org/portail/>), ‘nawaat’ meaning ‘core’ in Arabic, remaining thus the only diffused among the local population. David M. Faris. ‘La révolte en réseau: le *printemps arabe* et les *medias sociaux*’, *Politique étrangère*, 1 (Spring Issue, 2012), 99-109. In English: ‘Beyond *Social*

impressive acts of corruption made by the Tunisian president's family and on governmental scandals, abuses and repression.¹⁴⁶

The *popular* Cables also referred in academic research, but peripheral to the main subjects. They were mainly used to explain and interpret the general role of WikiLeaks in the Revolution, but not for their impact in the US-Tunisia relations of the period 2003-2010. Even if, in some cases, the use of *popular* Cables echoed an American participation, the interpretation or the nuance given would rather follow the stereotypes of *anti-Americanism* rather than their real content, with respect to the US-Tunisia relations.

3.4. US looking closer

Ben Ali continued in the *third* period his authoritarian and corrupt rule,¹⁴⁷ which was made worse by the end of the 1990s. His rather ambiguous policy in US-Tunisia relations turned course after September 11, resulting his alignment closer to the US. He joined George W. Bush's war against terrorism and NATO counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean region.¹⁴⁸

This partnership intensified after the attack in Djerba. Ben Ali then adopted a new anti-terrorist law inspired by the American counterpart.¹⁴⁹ However, this law was strongly opposed by international organisations¹⁵⁰ as severely violating human rights and press freedom, while terrorist events threatened the Tunisian tourist industry on which Tunisia's economy was heavily dependent. The number of international visitors in 2002 had "declined by six percent from the previous year, while revenues from tourism fell by thirteen percent".¹⁵¹

media revolutions. The Arab Spring and the networked revolt'. https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_PE_121_0099--beyond-social-mediarevolutions.htm (Accessed April 20, 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Erik Andrew-Gee, 'Making Sense of Tunisia. What were the three main catalysts of the recent protests?' The New Republic, January 17, 2011. <https://newrepublic.com/article/81611/making-sense-tunisia> (Accessed April 21, 2019).

¹⁴⁷ Fadhel Kaboub. 'The Making of the Tunisian Revolution'.

¹⁴⁸ Alexis Arief. 'Political Transition in Tunisia'. CRS Report for Congress, February 2, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ US Department of Justice. 'The USA Patriot Act: Preserving Life and Liberty'. <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ll/highlights.htm>, (Accessed May 21, 2019).

¹⁵⁰ Amnesty International. 'In the Name of Security: Routine Abuses in Tunisia', June 2008. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/560002008eng.pdf> (Accessed June 28, 2019).

¹⁵¹ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 212.

Since then unrest in Tunisia started to rise, together with a gradual change in the American foreign policy, asking since 2003 for a change towards democratisation in the MENA region. The visit of the US State secretary Colin Powell in Tunis on December 2, 2003 during which he pressured Ben Ali for changes should be seen in this context.

According to the relevant Cable¹⁵², Powell, after praising Tunisia's traditional progresses on women's rights and the socio-economic successes of the past periods insisted on the need to examine the root origins of terrorism, bringing the discussion on issues *unpleasant* to Ben Ali. He argued on the importance of human rights and of fighting social inequality in the region, asking for amplified democratisation, social inclusion and civil rights. Colin Powell was explicit:

“The world is now looking, he said, for Ben Ali to do more to promote political openness and media freedom, and he cited recent media reports criticizing the state of political freedom in Tunisia”¹⁵³

Powell's meeting was a forerunner of Ben Ali's important visit to Washington few months later in the context of the changing US foreign policy. Ben Ali sensed criticisms and strengthening pressure on the Tunisian government by the Bush administration in his visit to Washington on February 18, 2004.

Despite the expected appreciation for his antiterrorist policy and the special stance of the country in social achievements of the past, Ben Ali faced instead loud denounce for his autocratic government.¹⁵⁴ The Tunisian delegation sensed a glimpse of the *sacrificial friendship* at the White House,¹⁵⁵ without other form of US discouraging Ben Ali.

In 2005, after Bush's re-election, US State secretary Condoleezza Rice spoke at the American University in Cairo on US foreign policy.¹⁵⁶ Her speech was a clear confirmation of the *wide* view US focus on the MENA region, but this time mentioning specific countries too. Rice said:

¹⁵² WikiLeaks, ‘Secretary Powell’s December 2, 2003 Meeting with Tunisian President Ben Ali’, December 4, 2003. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03PART17_a.html (Accessed March 17, 2019).

¹⁵³ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁴ Kamel Labidi and Mahdi Bray. ‘Human Rights Groups Call on Bush to Press Tunisian President for Freedom and Reforms’. *Democracy Now*, February 18, 2004. https://www.democracynow.org/2004/2/18/human_rights_groups_call_on_bush (Accessed June 28, 2019).

¹⁵⁵ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. ‘United States Policy towards Tunisia...’, 85.

¹⁵⁶ US Department of State. ‘Secretary Condoleezza Rice Remarks at American University in Cairo’, June 20, 2005. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>. (Accessed June 4, 2019).

“For sixty years, my country, the US, has sought stability at the expense of democracy in this region, here in the Middle East, and we did not realize one or the other. We are borrowing today a different way. We support democratic aspirations of all people”.¹⁵⁷

According to analysts, Rice’s new emphasis for reform encouraged opposition movements in the region to act bolder.¹⁵⁸ Important American institutions on foreign policy focused on MENA their work upon the new US policy expressed in Cairo.¹⁵⁹ As shown by the results of Ben Ali’s government ongoing policy, the regime ignored or underestimated the change of US foreign policy and Washington’s friendly advice that now had a *close* view focus approach on Tunisia.

Instead of changing internal policy towards democratisation as suggested beyond the Atlantic, in order to reverse the growing discontent of Tunisians, Ben Ali’s regime invented to play a *strong card* of presumed international resonance: the introduction of the country in the Information Society. The regime opted for modernisation not in terms of a democracy-driven society but of an information-driven one.

The omnipresent Abdallah,¹⁶⁰ Ben Ali’s trusted hardliner that became emblematic in the course of the Tunisian crisis was the architect of this new state controlled project, a real *venture plan* for the country that was suffering severe political and socio-economic problems. Abdallah, a journalist by formation and expert in controlling information and the media, advanced the project to satisfy the ambitions of Ben Ali’s regime. He started preparations in 2005, in covert (at the beginning) cooperation with Microsoft, targeting at a networked society.

¹⁵⁷ BBC News, ‘Rice calls for Mid-East democracy’, June 20, 2005.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁹ For example, the Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/content/our-history> and the National Endowment for Democracy. <https://www.ned.org/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary/>

¹⁶⁰ Abdelwahab Abdallah (Monastir, 1940), a journalist by formation, political and media adviser at the palace, served as ambassador to UK (1988-1990). One of the emblematic hardliners of Ben Ali’s oppressing regime, he imposed his omnipotent shadow on the media for more than two decades. He was the Foreign minister in the intense period before the Revolution (2005-2010), relating his name with scandals and strain on the US-Tunisia relations. Put under house arrest in January 2011 he was under investigation for corruption, and is still under public outcry (See: Petitions24.net. ‘Pour la vérité sur le système Abdelwahab Abdallah. Déclaration à l’occasion du 59ème anniversaire de la République tunisienne’. Also in English: ‘Journalists Demand Truth about Dangerous Excesses of Media under Ben Ali’. July 24, 2016. https://www.petitions24.net/pour_la_verite_sur_le_systeme_abdelwahab_abdallah, Accessed June 5, 2019).

3.4.1. Information society: an ambition?

Among the direct results of Ben Ali's aspirations for introducing Tunisia in the era of Information Technology (IT) was the UNESCO sponsored World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), held in Tunis in 2005. A high-tech alibi of the government targeted at a hopeful balancing with his oppressing internal policy, which was not approved by the Americans.

The plan turned to be a major internationally echoed denounce of the human rights and press freedom situation in the country. The decision for hosting the WSIS Summit in Tunis provoked reactions in Tunisia and abroad. The hosting of this Summit by a country that systematically banned the Internet made Tunisia internationally known as an *Internet enemy* country.¹⁶¹

Many international NGO members were denied participation. Anti-government demonstrations of dissent resulted at the unveiling of a *double-faced* regime and displayed to the world the oppressive methods of an illiberal state that exercised violence in the streets during a major international event.¹⁶²

The Tunisian government initiatives for an information-driven society, in conditions of plain crisis, found fertile ground in the country and among Tunisian dissidents abroad. Internet developers, bloggers and users trained for years, in networked communication,¹⁶³ by various organisations related to the US government¹⁶⁴ and Western NGOs. A Tunisian dissident blogger, co-founder of *nawaat.org*, argued that the number of trained Arab bloggers and network activists was so rapidly increased that "no one can accurately predict the consequences of these activities on the nature of the Arab digital activism."¹⁶⁵

The agreement with Microsoft was of great importance in many respects, deserving special attention. On one hand, it was a business project agreed between the Tunisian

¹⁶¹ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 214-215.

¹⁶² Ibidem, 215, fn.: Jo Twist. 'Controversy blights UN net summit', *BBC News*, November 18, 2005, bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4450474.stm (Accessed May 20, 2019).

¹⁶³ Ron Nixon. 'US Groups Helped Nurture Arab Uprisings'. *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/world/15aid.html> (Accessed June 28, 2019).

¹⁶⁴ Such as the Freedom House, the International Republican Institute. <https://www.iri.org/who-we-are>, the National Democratic Institute. <https://www.ndi.org/who-we-are>, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

¹⁶⁵ Sami Ben Gharbia. 'The Internet Freedom Fallacy and the Arab Digital activism', *nawaat.org*, September 17, 2010. <https://nawaat.org/portail/2010/09/17/the-internet-freedom-fallacy-and-the-arab-digital-activism/> (Accessed June 28, 2019).

government and a private American worldwide-company that attracted the *anti-Americanism* stereotypes of the academic historiography and journalism. On the other hand, it is the *close view*, in terms of the relevant Cable¹⁶⁶ in which it is documented the political scepticism and questions (with hints about corruption) of the Tunis US Embassy on this agreement, signed finally on July 2006 in South Africa,¹⁶⁷ but not announced in Tunis.

The American scepticism is clearly expressed in the Cable, with hints about corruption. Both the Tunisian government and Microsoft kept silent on the agreement, despite the US Embassy requests to be aware of it. Only two months after the signing of the agreement an overview with only some points was provided to the Embassy by Salwa Smaoui,¹⁶⁸ the Microsoft's Director General.

Microsoft appointed the American educated Tunisian Smaoui, a year before, to elaborate the agreement and despite her frequent contacts with the Embassy she was hesitant to provide the final document.¹⁶⁹ Her excuses were based on the suspicions of Tunisian officials that were asking, "Why she was working for the Americans herself being a Tunisian"¹⁷⁰. Microsoft's reservations to disclose the agreement further convinced US diplomacy about the Tunisian government's attitude for secrecy. Despite the theoretical benefits from the expected improvements in the effectiveness of Tunisia's government the US Embassy was reluctant to believe that Ben Ali's regime would avoid to use this new IT infrastructure to interference with the Internet freedoms, having now augmented capacities to monitor the citizens.

These US Embassy reservations were burdened by the certainty that Microsoft's benefits from this deal would exceed the cost.¹⁷¹ Again the Cable shows that the *values and rights* concept of the US attitude in Tunisia was shading the *business as usual* concept, familiar to the regime.

Another issue that evidently makes the Embassy wary of the Microsoft deal is the provision about the training of handicapped Tunisians that was part of the contract.

¹⁶⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Microsoft Inks Agreement with GoT'.

¹⁶⁷ During the Microsoft Government Leaders Forum Africa In Cape Town in the presence of Bill Gates and the former US President Bill Clinton, July 2006. Cheick Modibo Diarra from Mali was the Chairman of Microsoft Africa from 2006 to the end of 2011. <https://news.microsoft.com/bill-gates-microsoft-government-leaders-forum-africa-2006/> (Accessed May 25, 2019).

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.wise-qatar.org/biography/salwa-smaoui/> (Accessed May 24, 2019)

¹⁶⁹ WikiLeaks. 'Microsoft Inks Agreement with GoT'.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem.

The Cable recalls that the Tunisian president's consort Leila Ben Ali was running a charity for handicapped Tunisians, noticing that, even if at first sight this provision seems opening challenges for the handicapped in the IT sector,

“the program's affiliation with Leila Ben Ali's charity is indicative of the backroom maneuvering sometimes required to finalize a deal”.¹⁷²

After these strong negative thoughts addressed from the Embassy, the US diplomacy in Tunis is explicit positive for the use of Facebook and actively involved, as documented in the relevant Cable¹⁷³.

Facebook soon became popular in Tunisia with user numbers rising significantly (around 2009). They were dealing with a variety of issues from sports to politics including exchanging ideas on the problems that the country was facing. The site replaced traditional media that was lacking in topics interesting for the youth, e.g., living issues, unemployment, brain drain etc., as the US Embassy was aware from direct accounts of journalists complaining for restrictions that were due to the information control exercised by the government authorities.

Facebook and a few Tunisian networking sites filled this gap of information, but intensely disapproved and critiqued by the regime-controlled press. This caused a temporary ban of Facebook to the discontent of Ben Ali's sixteen-year old daughter, resulting the immediate lift of ban, as the president himself confessed to the US secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in September 2008.¹⁷⁴

The regime's aspirations to make Tunisia a leader in IT turned out to be a *boomerang*. The political and socio-economic discontent of the Tunisian people, in the ten-year period before the Revolution, is clearly reflected in the *close* view account of the situation by the Tunis US Embassy.

The content of the Cables is clearly showing the impasse of a regime in an advanced state of corruption and oppression. The US-Tunisia relations came to a clear new field of redefinition of support and interaction, well described by the following analysis of the Cables.

¹⁷² Ibidem.

¹⁷³ WikiLeaks. 'GoT Friends?: Facebook Popular, Despite Domestic Smear Campaign', February 20, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS99_a.html (Accessed March 19, 2019).

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem.

3.4.2. Shortly before the Revolution

For better understanding of US-Tunisia relations in the *third* period just before the Revolution, the study of the Cables transmitted by the Tunis US Embassy in that period allows taking a unique close look at the attitude of the US *vis-à-vis* Ben Ali's regime. The focus of the academic research and the press was on the few *popular* Cables referring to the regime's last three years.

Two well known of them attract attention and are highlighted here. The first,¹⁷⁵ dated June 23, 2008,¹⁷⁶ is related to the illegal methods followed by the ruling families: "if Bourguiba was an autocrat but not a kleptocrat; Ben Ali had no such saving grace".¹⁷⁷ The US ambassador made a detailed list of the "rapacious frenzy and corruption network at the head of Tunisia",¹⁷⁸ dealing with the subject with "sarcastic references drawn from American popular culture (*The sky's the limit, Show me your money, This land is my land, Mob rule? All in the family*)".¹⁷⁹

The Cable¹⁸⁰ comments that corruption was a political and economic problem, caused by a government system that was a sworn enemy of transparency and accountability, tormenting the economy, harming investments and spreading like a disease in most aspects of Tunisian life. US ambassador Godec insisted that:

"Although the petty corruption rankles, it is the excesses of Ben Ali's family that inspire outrage among Tunisians. With Tunisians facing rising inflation and high unemployment, the conspicuous displays of wealth and persistent rumors of corruption have added fuel to the fire ... a growing number of Tunisians believe those at the top are keeping the benefits for themselves. ... Corruption is the elephant in the room; it is the problem everyone knows about, but no one can publicly acknowledge".¹⁸¹

The second Cable came a year later: the US ambassador is now not in the mood for playing on words about the situation in Tunisia. The time had come to think about the next step in the US-Tunisia relations and in the *close view* Cable dated July 19, 2009,

¹⁷⁵ Gregory White. 'This is the WikiLeak that Sparked the Tunisian Crisis', *Business Insider*, January 14, 2011.

¹⁷⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Corruption in Tunisia: What's Yours is Mine', June 23, 2008. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS679_a.html (Accessed May 20, 2019)

¹⁷⁷ Lotfi Ben Rejeb. 'United States Policy towards Tunisia', 87.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, fn.: http://middleeast.about.com/od/tunisia/a/tunisia-corruption-wikileaks_2.htm.

¹⁸⁰ WikiLeaks. 'Corruption in Tunisia: What's Yours is Mine', June 23, 2008.

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

he describes the Tunisian regime as a *sclerotic police state in difficulty*¹⁸²: “Today, Tunisia is not an ally ... Tunisia is in difficulty, as well as our relationships”¹⁸³.

He indicated that the end of the Ben Ali regime was fast approaching. He could not predict an uncontrolled revolution, but he is advising his government to communicate directly with the Tunisian people through social media, especially the youth.

The ambassador recalled in this Cable¹⁸⁴ the Embassy’s own communication improvements in social media and its efforts towards socialising with Tunisian youth through arts and cultural initiatives.

The Embassy’s outreach included the attention to increase the popularity of the American Corners¹⁸⁵ as easily accessed sites of free information on the US.

In this same Cable it is also pointed out the concern about the US interests for keeping Tunisia under control, but not at the cost of political freedoms and human rights. The notion *values and rights*¹⁸⁶ seem now to be preceding the traditional *business as usual*.

After noticing the difficulties of doing business in Tunisia the Cable¹⁸⁷ insists on the country’s importance for the US. Calling attention against the threat of Islamist terrorism and extremism and favouring efforts on keeping intact the professionalism and neutrality of the Tunisian military. The importance of the latter was shown during the uprising in the late 2010-early 2011. The Cable concluded by remembering that the US,

“also have an interest in fostering greater political openness and respect for human rights. It is in our interest, too, to build prosperity and Tunisia’s middle class, the underpinning for the country’s long-term stability. ... The US needs help in this region to promote our values and policies”¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸² WikiLeaks. ‘Troubled Tunisia: What Should We Do?’ July 19, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS492_a.html (Accessed May 20, 2019)

¹⁸³ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁵ American Corners are US information spots (in libraries and other sites) related to education and cultural activities associated to US Embassies world-wide. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/education-culture/american-spaces/american-corner-tunis/>

¹⁸⁶ This concept is introduced in this thesis, as working hypothesis, to describe the new elements (e.g. democratisation, civil rights, rule of law, need for changes) introduced in the US foreign policy for the MENA region. This was during the US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s mandate and especially after his successor Condoleezza Rice’s speech in Cairo, in 2005. The concept does not replace or contrast the traditional *business as usual*, but it is evidently a prerequisite, as the Cables demonstrate in the case of the US-Tunisia relations in 2003-2010.

¹⁸⁷ WikiLeaks. ‘Troubled Tunisia: What Should We Do?’

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem.

3.5. Cables: building the *close* view topics

The set of almost five hundred Cables concerning Tunisia in the period 2003-2010 was downloaded from the WikiLeaks database for the purpose of this research and arranged according to their quantities per thematic content and their time coverage. The result of this arrangement gives in the first place the theme US-Tunisia affairs with the majority of Cables covering all seven years of the examined period 2003-2010.

The theme Human rights is coming second, with Cables half in number from those concerning US-Tunisia affairs. The Cables about Press freedom coming closely third in number,¹⁸⁹ both Human rights and Press freedom covering the six-year period 2005-2010. The arrangement indicates the degree of attraction of the American *close* view interest for themes about Tunisia in the *third* period that therefore deserves priority in research.

The study of the Cables related to the themes of interest enables the compilation of interrelated topics worth narrating, not widely known before. The setting of Cables into themes cannot be content-narrow. The content of the Cables may be relevant or related to Cables of another theme,¹⁹⁰ or of themes covering shorter periods.¹⁹¹ But due to the restrictive in length nature of this research the whole amount of the Cables cannot be used here. Thus, a selection was made to represent the major number of Cables included in a specific theme, covering the larger time spans of the period concerned.

The themes US-Tunisia relations and the combined Human rights and Press freedom fulfilled both requirements. The selected Cables, a fifteen percent of the five hundred downloaded, helped the formatting of five topics concerning the US *close* view on US-Tunisia relations, and of three topics concerning the US *close* view on issues of human rights and press freedom in Tunisia in the *third* period.

¹⁸⁹ In parity with the thematic sets of Internal politics, US Business interests.

¹⁹⁰ Cables in other thematic sets covering a five year period, e.g., Political repression, 2006-2010, and Middle East and Iran issues, Terrorism, Civil society, Religious issues and Focus on Ben Ali's personal situation or others covering shorter periods, from four to only two years

¹⁹¹ Thematic categories covering shorter period of time from four to only two years are: Meetings with the opposition, 2006-2008, Guantanamo issue, 2007-2009, Cultural diplomacy, 2005-2006, 2009, Corruption, 2006, 2008-2009, EU affairs, 2006-2007, 2009, Democratic reform, 2007-2008, Military issues, 2007-2008, 2010.

The eight topics extracted from the Cables give very representative aspects of the level and quality of US-Tunisia relations in an important period for Tunisia's modern history (2003-2010). The topics based on their relevance in content and context, and on the repeated presence of key Tunisian government politicians and entrenched political meanings.

Taken as primary sources of information the Cables used in this study allow for a new insight on the decade before the Revolution, providing new information and knowledge and answering the objectives of the research question.

The almost five hundred Cables gathered from the WikiLeaks database exceed in number and thematic content what is necessary for the fulfilment of the requirements of this thesis. The use of more Cables with different thematic content could be the subject of future research providing more complex and extended analyses and more stories brought to light. Their combination with other sources will also be of interest in a future research.¹⁹²

¹⁹² As are, e.g., relevant US Department of State documents. https://findit.state.gov/search?affiliate=dos_stategov&page=1&query=Tunisia&utf8=, (Accessed April 21, 2019); the *Voice of America* Editorials. <https://editorials.voia.gov/s?k=Tunisia&tab=all&pi=1&r=any&pp=10> (Accessed April 20, 2019); the Cables from other content relevant themes, US and International NGOs as Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2005/country-chapters/tunisia> (Accessed May 8, 2019); the Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/tunisia> (Accessed May 8, 2019); the Agencies, like the Millennium Challenge Corporation. <https://assets.mcc.gov/content/uploads/cn-121018-tunisia-compact-609g.pdf> (Accessed May 8, 2019) and other political media, e.g. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/post-wikileaks-lessons-from-tunisian-intifada/>

4. MAIN TOPICS FROM THE WIKILEAKS

The approach to the US-Tunisia relations in the *third* period is based here on the use of selected, less known Cables representing the US *close* view to Tunisia's internal affairs in a period of unrest. The aim is to answer the research question that the US concern for Tunisia in the period 2003-2010 was active, in *close* view, *in situ* and not at all *degraded* as suggested in the relevant historiography. Main sources are the Cables selected from the WikiLeaks for the period 2003-2010.

Taken as primary sources, the Cables are organised in two major thematic groups concerning the US-Tunisia relations and the Human rights – Press freedom. In both groups a number of representative topics are built, five in the first group and three in the second. The analysis of these topics clearly shows the strong US attention for the situation in Tunisia in the period interesting this thesis.

From the Cables selected, there are only two in 2003, both very important for the state of the US-Tunisia relations at the time, and none in the year 2004,¹⁹³ but they flow continuously from 2005 to 2010. A subset of sixty-eight Cables (all referenced) that correspond to ca. fifteen percent of the total almost five hundred mined from the WikiLeaks, are used here.

Parts of the content of the selected Cables are double quoted and referenced, (the omitted parts marked by ellipses), keeping the wording and phrasing of the original. Keeping the Cable text unaltered it is preserved: (a) the accuracy of US diplomacy's local focus on what was going on in Tunisia, and (b) the other side's reasoning and reacting.

This keeps intact as *capturing image* parts of the content, as reported in the Cables, of the contacts of Tunis US Embassy with their Tunisian interlocutors (hardliners and moderates), as well as maintaining the expressions of their own understanding of the facts.

¹⁹³ There is no official or other explanation found for the lack of Cables in 2004. This might be possibly related to the crisis of the Tunisian relations with the Arab World in that year. In any case, this gap is filled by that year's report by Carol Migdalovitz. 'Tunisia: Current Issues'. CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service-The Library of Congress. October 15, 2004 (updated).

4.1. US-Tunisia relations

This theme is highly related with the Embassy's activity in terms of bilateral and international foreign policies and security, economy, defence, intelligence and Internet freedom. The selected Cables form five topics as very representative of the specific theme in the concerned period (2003-2010), entitled: *Two key discussions*, *Abdallah's pressing*, *Matters of Defence*, *CODEL surveillance*, and *The American School*.

From these selected topics the first (*Two key discussions*) presents the frame of the US concern to pass from the *business as usual* phase of the US-Tunisia relations during the *first* and *second* periods of post-Independence Tunisia in a new phase of *values and rights*, in the *third* period, with the US asking for democratisation and freedoms. The second topic (*Abdallah's pressing*) unveils a major hardliner figure of the regime, orchestrating the *tug of war* implemented by the Tunisian government in the US-Tunisian relations.

The third topic (*Matters of Defence*) is representative of the US shift from the *business as usual* concept (usually present in the issues of Defence) to the *values and rights* concept becoming now prerequisite for cooperation. Here, the figure in Tunisian government of a moderate personality emerges counterbalancing the impact of the hardliners in the US-Tunisian relations.

The fourth topic (*CODEL surveillance*) shows that the US attention for democratisation and freedoms in Tunisia was not only a local affair of the Tunis US Embassy and its connection with the US Department of State, but it concerned the US Congress as well. The *tug of war* character of the relations was not only limited to the contacts with the Embassy (related to the US administration) but was also repeated on contacts with the US Congress.

The fifth topic (*The American School*) shows that the Tunis government did not hesitate to follow tough policies in order to keep distant US attention for *values and rights*.

The dispute of the status of the renowned American School in Tunis, a most delicate issue for the Americans, was a serious wound to the US-Tunisia relations. This topic, and the way it was solved, is an example of the US determination to demonstrate its strong resolve for active presence in the country.

4.1.1. Two key discussions

Two very interesting key discussions in 2003, with different attitudes and context, are significant for Tunisia's perspective and the roles played by two leading Tunisian politicians in the ten next years to come: the Prime minister (PM) Ghannouchi's¹⁹⁴ discussion with the US ambassador that took place in July¹⁹⁵ and Ben Ali's with the US State secretary Colin Powell in December.¹⁹⁶

In a wide-ranging review of US-Tunisia relations, the Tunisian PM praised the relationship with the US, arguing about the need for measured advances in internal political opening, moderately opposing the US pressure for democratisation.

The *tug of war* attitude, moderate or hard talked, was there since the early *third* period (2000-2010). In the relevant Cable¹⁹⁷ the PM further disagreed with some US regional policies but agreed on the existence of a consensus in Tunisia for the building of a more democratic society, but insisted on approaching the issue with *careful steps* since there was no space for mistakes on the issue.

He remembered the threat of extremism both from left and right, the secular and the religious respectively and the danger for the country to see the social and economic achievements of the past disappear, insisting that the Tunisian government,

“was committed to maintaining the tolerant, moderate and progressive character of the Tunisian state, but that this required a gradual approach, appealing for understanding from the West about the measured pace of political opening in Tunisia”.¹⁹⁸

Ghannouchi's message was in line with the Tunisian government policy of discussing foreign issues keeping the American eye distant in a *wide* view of the MENA region, most of the times criticising (mainly softly) the US policy on the Palestinian issue.

¹⁹⁴ Mohamed Ghannouchi (Sousse, 1941) was named Prime Minister in 1999, after having served as minister of Finance (1989-1992) and minister of International cooperation and foreign investment (1992-1999). He was a moderate, considered as a technocrat and even if he was close to the palace, he steered clear of the scandals of the last years before the Revolution. After Ben Ali's ousting he made a bid to assume the presidency, but other political elites overcame his ambition. Ghannouchi remained Prime Minister up until February 2011. (See: various web sources, Accessed May 23, 2019)

¹⁹⁵ WikiLeaks. 'Ambassador's Farewell Call on Prime Minister Ghannouchi', July 23, 2003. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03TUNIS1947_a.html (Accessed March 17, 2019).

¹⁹⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Secretary Powell's December 2, 2003 Meeting with Tunisian President Ben Ali', December 4, 2003. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03PART17_a.html (Accessed March 17, 2019).

¹⁹⁷ WikiLeaks. 'Ambassador's Farewell Call on Prime Minister Ghannouchi', July 23, 2003.

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem.

On the other hand, when the American side was talking internal issues, the Tunisian line of arguing was to avoid any US *close* view on the issues. This was done, by praising the past achievements and by giving grounds for a desired US understanding based on threats of internal extremism, mainly related to political opposition, that could easily turn to terrorism as seen in neighbouring countries.

In all these matters, the Tunisian government promoted the idea that the regime had the wisdom to keep the situation in check. Furthermore, they claimed that American attention and criticism of its internal policies only hindered their government's effectiveness and could be attributed to the Americans having difficulties to understand the situation.

Since 2003 the US pressure on the Tunisian government continued firmly. The US ambassador warned the country's leadership to make efforts to integrate Tunisia into the global economic and political system. But the Tunisian government response was since then stereotyped: the need to build a more democratic society must be undertaken at a measured pace to avoid mistakes and to remain vigilant to the threat from the secular extremists on the left and the religious extremists on the right.

The moderate Ghannouchi together with Defence minister Morjane,¹⁹⁹ were apparently the closest to the US among the members of the Tunisian government, but less influencing in domestic politics, during this period. Both continued to be active in Tunisian politics during the post-Revolution period.

In December 2003, in a lively almost two hours long meeting, reported in the relevant Cable²⁰⁰, Ben Ali suffered opposing Colin Powell's pressure on the need for political openness and freedoms. The Tunisian president was turning the discussion into the same *safe* issues, according to the Tunisian constant line when arguing with the

¹⁹⁹ Kamel Morjane (Hammam Sousse, 1948), a moderate politician, with long international career, well educated in Europe and the US. High-ranking United Nations official (1977-1996), he served as Defence minister in the same period with Abdallah (2005-2010). With his international pedigree he was balancing Abdallah's practices in his contacts with US officials. In 2010 he was Abdallah's successor in Foreign Ministry. (See: WikiLeaks. 'Biographical Information for Tunisian Defence Minister', February 19, 2010. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10TUNIS105_a.html, Accessed May 5, 2019). He is continuing his career in the post-Revolution Tunisia founding a new centrist party (2011), merged with other smaller parties in 2014 (See: *El-Moubaradara (The Initiative)*. Imed Bahri. 'Tunisie. Les Destouriens s'agrègent autour de Kamel Morjane et El Moudaradara', *Kapitalis*, March 31, 2012. <http://www.kapitalis.com/politik/72-partis/9127-tunisie-les-destouriens-sagregeant-autour-kamel-morjane-et-el-moubarada.html>, Accessed June 5, 2019. *The Initiative* becomes *National Destourian Initiative* in 2014). Since 2014 he is a member of the UN Advisory Board on Human Security (See: 'Qui est Kamel Morjane?' *Directinfo*. <https://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2014/11/04/qui-est-kamel-morjane/>. Novembre 4, 2014, Accessed June 5, 2019).

²⁰⁰ WikiLeaks. 'Secretary Powell's December 2, 2003 Meeting with Tunisian President Ben Ali', December 4, 2003.

Americans: the US-Tunisian friendship and strategic relationship, the US responsibilities in Iraq and the Palestinian issue, the defend of the achievements in human rights and freedom of journalists, as claimed by the Tunisian government. When Powell insisted on the human rights agenda and democratisation, Ben Ali was changing the discussion promoting his antiterrorism standing, assuring of the correctness of his policies. However, Powell put order in the discussion,

“noting that he [Ben Ali] would meet with President Bush in Washington in February 2004, reiterating Tunisia needed to demonstrate progress on human rights, in order to counter the image that was widely portrayed in the international media”.²⁰¹

It was almost a year after September 11, that US foreign policy started showing systematic concern about democratisation, human rights and press freedom in Tunisia. This was marked in the end of 2003 when US State secretary Colin Powell pressured Ben Ali to move forward with political opening, greater democratisation and media freedom, facing his strong resistance in defending the country’s oppressing status quo and challenging US Embassy’s human rights reporting.

Ben Ali’s polemic attitude in this important meeting with the head of the US foreign policy in the end of 2003 was the start of the countdown for his regime. The US took Ben Ali’s arguments as an attempt to change the topic of discussion with routine stereotypes, mostly echoing the successes (of *Bourguibism*) in the past.

The US insisted firmly on human rights and democratisation issues as primary concerns. Evidently the *values and rights* concept openly promoted by the Americans as a prerequisite, sounded unpleasant to their Tunisian interlocutors preferring to hear only about *business as usual* and praises of the country’s past achievements.

4.1.2. Abdallah’s pressing

A very characteristic case in the US-Tunisia relations in the period 2003-2010 was the pressures applied to the US policy by the emblematic for the Tunisian regime Foreign minister (FM) Abdallah. He was trying to keep the American interest distant from Tunisia’s internal affairs and infringements of human rights in 2006²⁰² and 2007,

²⁰¹ Ibidem.

²⁰² WikiLeaks. ‘Embassy Officers Blocked from Meeting Human Rights Organization in Bizerte’, October 5, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2501_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019). Also, WikiLeaks. ‘Embassy Officers Blocked, Again, from Meeting Human Rights Organization in Bizerte’, November 1, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2688_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019) and WikiLeaks. ‘Foreign Minister Abdallah Lays it on Thick’, November 9, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2743_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

as he repeatedly pressured the US ambassador²⁰³ and the US Near East Affairs deputy assistant State secretary.²⁰⁴ The pressure imposed to Ben Ali by Colin Powell in 2003 about the human rights issue, seems to be the permanent constant of the US foreign policy in Tunisia for the years to come.

The diplomatic incident that happened in October 5, 2006 is indicative of the *close* view and *in situ* interest of the US about this issue. According the relevant Cable,²⁰⁵ the US Embassy officers travelled to Bizerte to meet with the active regional branch of the Tunisian Human Rights League (*Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme*, LTDH):

“Upon arrival, the US Embassy officer immediately noticed the presence of three plain-clothed policemen in front of the LTDH venue. ... The policemen used their telephones, and shortly thereafter positioned themselves in front of the gate, blocking entrance. When asked by Embassy officer why they could not enter, the policemen said they had instructions. The local LTDH head then appeared and began yelling about the injustices of the dictator Ben Ali. To the Embassy officer questions the head policeman responded about instructions and, that there had been a court order that the LTDH could not meet. ... Interestingly, while several LTDH members shouted at, and pushed the police officers, the police did not act violently. Other LTDH members appeared to have a civil, at times even joking, rapport with the police officers, whom they noted were only doing what they were told. ... While US Embassy officials were still in Bizerte, in Tunis the Embassy protested the actions of police... . This event is only the latest, albeit a particularly egregious, example of Tunisian government’s continued actions to frustrate and limit the work of US Embassy officers...”²⁰⁶

In the light of continued interference in the work of the Embassy, US officers who were physically present *in situ*, recommended for reciprocity actions, e.g.,²⁰⁷ to deny FM Abdallah some of the requested meetings, to release a public statement of protest for the obstructions limiting the work of the Embassy’s officers and for the Tunisian government actions against the freedom of legal organisations to meet in assembly,

“the US government has long been concerned by curbs on fundamental freedoms in Tunisia, but this action by Tunisian government to prevent US diplomats from conducting an open meeting with well-known human rights defenders is a particularly egregious example Tunisian government’s policies. ... The US *Chargé d’Affaires* in Tunis protested these actions, and there will be following up in Washington”.²⁰⁸

²⁰³ WikiLeaks. ‘Ambassador Presents Credentials to Foreign Minister, Gets the Abdallah Treatment’, November 24, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2801_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁰⁴ WikiLeaks. ‘DAS Carpenter’s Meeting with FM Abdallah’, January 17, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS84_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁰⁵ WikiLeaks. ‘Embassy Officers Blocked from Meeting Human Rights Organization in Bizerte’.

²⁰⁶ Ibidem.

²⁰⁷ Ibidem.

²⁰⁸ Ibidem.

On November 18, 2006 in an hour-long meeting, on the occasion of the new US ambassador Godec presenting credentials to the Foreign minister (FM), a range of issues were discussed, on Abdallah's urgent invitation, reported in the Cable.²⁰⁹ The FM obviously considered politically painful the US *Chargé d'Affaires* protest and tried to minimise the importance of the Bizerte events. He claimed the case minor (*little*), not deserving to be reported to Washington, to hear Godec's arguments that denying freedom of access to the US Embassy officers is non-negotiable as is the freedom of association and expression. Interestingly Abdallah had implicitly blamed the Interior ministry for putting obstacles in the Embassy's freedom to work.²¹⁰ To imply a ministry responsibility to another minister was of common occurrence in the Tunisian government's contacts with the US ambassador (Morjane used to do the same)

It is clear that the regime disliked the transfer of news about oppression of human rights in Washington and Abdallah was manufacturing his theory about *little* and *big* things in the US-Tunisian relations, and the need to control the *little* things in order not to become *big*. Domestic issues were obviously attributed as *little* things. In the conclusive part of the relevant Cable²¹¹ it is obvious that discussing foreign policy was much more comfortable for Abdallah than defending Tunisia's internal affairs. It was clear that the Bizerte issue was for the FM a *little* thing in domestic politics that should not count in bilateral relations. According to the Tunisian government such *little* things should not become *big* and lead to Washington's concern. Godec believed that Abdallah was speaking with Ben Ali's voice. Evidently, the LTDH issue becoming news in Washington bothered the palace. Of equal interest on Abdallah's concern to neglect the human rights issues of the US agenda is the account of his meeting with the US Near East Affairs deputy assistant secretary of State (NEA/DAS).

In the relevant Cable,²¹² it is reported Abdallah's theory that political freedoms in Tunisia could be discussed after the eradication of extremism and terrorism. In response the US NEA/DAS argued, in January 2007, that there are always methods to

²⁰⁹ WikiLeaks. 'Foreign Minister Abdallah Lays it on Thick', November 9, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2743_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²¹⁰ WikiLeaks. 'Foreign Minister Abdallah Lays it on Thick'.

²¹¹ Ibidem

²¹² WikiLeaks. 'DAS Carpenter's Meeting with FM Abdallah', January 17, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS84_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

enlarge the political space, by legitimising the people's right for association, the freedom of expression and democratisation, which enforce the combat against radicalism, according to the US foreign policy expressed two years earlier in Cairo by the US secretary of State Rice.²¹³

The innuendo here complies with diplomatic language. To Abdallah's assurances that diversity and freedom existed in the Tunisian press the US suggested that improvements in the media were necessary, targeting at investments for modernisation of the profession and larger circulation of the press. The FM purposely considered as *blasphemous* any foreign financing of the media, mishandling the suggestion, but accepting any possible training offer for media outlets.²¹⁴

On the other hand, the multifarious FM proved inadequate in his portfolio's main duties ignoring important opportunities offered by the US for the improvement of skills and for opening job opportunities to help the country's suffering economy.

In NEA/DAS's relevant questions about the Tunisian absence from various successful Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)²¹⁵ projects, implemented elsewhere in the fields of education, media, banking, politics etc., Abdallah appeared unprepared to answer, asking to hear more about these projects.²¹⁶

The US Embassy was also reporting Abdallah's collateral actions, as it was, e.g., his wife's unexpected appointment as president of *Banque de Tunisie*, in April 2008. She replaced a highly respected banker who held the post since 1992 and was forcibly removed to create the opening for Abdallah's wife.²¹⁷ On the other hand he was putting obstacles to the US even for doing *business as usual* obviously retaliating to the American attention about the *values and rights* prerequisite.

In his well-known Cable "Troubled Tunisia: What should we do?"²¹⁸ Godec stressed how Abdallah made it *exceptionally difficult* for the US mission to carry out even routine diplomatic work. He developed a suffocating bureaucracy around the mission

²¹³ Ibidem.

²¹⁴ Ibidem.

²¹⁵ The US Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). <https://mepi.state.gov> (Accessed May 22, 2019). Also in *Voice of America* Editorials: <https://editorials.voa.gov/s?k=Tunisia&tab=all&pi=1&r=any&pp=10> (Accessed April 21, 2019)

²¹⁶ WikiLeaks. 'DAS Carpenter's Meeting with FM Abdallah'.

²¹⁷ WikiLeaks. 'Ben Ali, Inc. Takes Over a Bank', May 28, 2008. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS568_a.html (Accessed March 19, 2019).

²¹⁸ WikiLeaks. 'Troubled Tunisia: What Should We Do?', July 19, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS492_a.html (Accessed May 20, 2019)

requiring written orders and permissions from the Foreign affairs ministry (MFA) of all types of activities and contacts with all sector services of Tunisian administration.

The *tug of war* was in this case an everyday practice. The Cable is explicit:

“Mid-level Tunisian government officers are no longer allowed to communicate with US Embassy personnel without express authorization and MFA-cleared instructions. All meeting requests and demarches must be conveyed by diplomatic note. Most go unanswered”.²¹⁹

US Embassy’s constant pressure on Tunisian government, concerning human rights and press freedom, was dense especially during ambassador Godec’s service in Tunis. This was the most important issue of the American policy that caused permanent frictions with the Tunisian government.

The leading actor of Tunisian government’s reaction was the notorious and influencing FM Abdallah who was continuously trying to keep the American interest distant from Tunisia’s oppressing policy on human rights issues, turning to other issues e.g. about extremism, internal threats etc., where Abdallah was repetitive. The Tunisian government and US *tug of war* on human rights and civil freedom was a constant in US-Tunisia relations after 2005 to the Revolution.

The Tunisian government was more comfortable discussing foreign policy than was debating domestic subjects. For the regime’s hardliners there was an important difference between *little* and *big* things that count in the bilateral relations. For them, the *little* things were democratisation, human rights and press freedom, which should not become *big*.

4.1.3. Matters of Defence

Defence issues are ranked high in the American concern for Tunisia in the period 2008-2010. This is shown in the Cables, from Ben Ali’s interest²²⁰ and the US officers’ contacts with the Defence minister (DM),²²¹ as well as from the US attention

²¹⁹ Ibidem.

²²⁰ WikiLeaks. ‘Ben Ali Meets with A/S Welch: Progress on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, Regional Challenges’, March 3, 2008. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS193_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²²¹ WikiLeaks. ‘Ambassador Presses DefMin for Greater Information Sharing; Morjane Cautions Against Opposition Contacts’, March 27, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS179_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019). Also, WikiLeaks. ‘MoD Morjane: No Security Threat to US Military, Bilateral Military Relations have Improved’, July 15, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS469_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019) and WikiLeaks. ‘Representative Conaway Stresses Security Cooperation is a Two-Way Street: December 19 with the Tunisian MoD’, December 22, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS924_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

about the profile of the new DM appointed in early 2010.²²² But while the Tunisian government was reacting with interest for matters of Defence, it was very reluctant for exchanging Intelligence information with the US. In late February 2008 Ben Ali received the US assistant secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

According to the relevant Cable²²³ the counterterrorism (CT) cooperation was undisputed. Ben Ali was well aware of the forerunning problems in the MENA region, predicting the suffering of Yemen and Saudi Arabia from the advancements of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Godec noticed that:

“Ben Ali was warm, open, and occasionally animated (at which point he sometimes slipped into Tunisian dialect). His quick and strong assurances on CT cooperation were welcome ... On regional issues, Ben Ali showed again that he is a moderate”.²²⁴

In March 29, 2009, the US ambassador met DM Morjane in preparation for the Joint Military Commission (JMC). In the Cable²²⁵ reporting the issue, the meeting was arranged after the fiasco of an already planned joint exercise (Atlas Drop) that was cancelled due to bilateral communication problems. Obviously this happened because of lacking information exchange, always requested by the American side in all meetings with Tunisian counterparts. The meeting soon became an opportunity for DM Morjane to complain for interferences in his work by the presidency and the FM Abdallah.

The dispute was about the splitting of the US military assistance, without consulting Morjane, in favour of the Interior ministry, despite the agreements with the US. The ambassador insisted on what was initially arranged, to Morjane's content, asking Godec to address the message to the FM. This showed the conflicts that existed within the Tunisian government and the interferences of the presidency in the functioning of government.

According to the same Cable,²²⁶ Morjane, pleased from the result of his complains, started expressing himself as an admirer of President Obama's policies in the Middle East, assuring that he was disheartened by the anti-Americanism of the Arabic media.

²²² WikiLeaks. 'Biographical Information for Tunisian Defence Minister', February 19, 2010. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10TUNIS105_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²²³ WikiLeaks. 'Ben Ali Meets with A/S Welch: Progress on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, Regional Challenges'.

²²⁴ Ibidem.

²²⁵ WikiLeaks. 'Ambassador Presses DefMin for Greater Information Sharing; Morjane Cautions Against Opposition Contacts'.

²²⁶ Ibidem.

He continued in the same line saying that such attitudes make difficult the proper handling of the US-Tunisian relations, remembering the visit in Bizerte of a NATO ship in June 2008 met with a small protest against the war in Iraq. Since that minor protest was organised by an opposition party, the PDP,²²⁷ Morjane found the opportunity to imply discontent to the US ambassador for supporting the opposition. To Morjane's innuendo, Godec assured that it is a principle of US policy to keep contacts with all legal political parties in the country and that this would continue to happen, without of course meaning support to any. The ambassador believed that Morjane spoke on instruction, without mentioning the PDP, but clearly referring to this party. In the Cable Godec adds:

"...This is not the first time that the US ambassador has received such a message. It is probable that the palace chose Morjane to convey the message this time, because the DM is seen as someone who can communicate effectively with US counterparts".²²⁸

This Cable is interesting not only because the palace had maybe chosen the moderate cosmopolitan Morjane for passing messages to the US against the opposition, as the ambassador commented, but also because Morjane was possibly trying to expose *good conduct* to the Americans, for his own future plans in an eventual post-Ben Ali Tunisia, considering his international experience as an advantage in the battle of succession.²²⁹

The DM spoke again with Godec on July 15, 2009, little before the termination of the ambassador's mission,

"downplaying the threat against the US Military after an alleged plot... . He cited increased funding as a key example of the improved bilateral military relations. The ambassador ... pressed him to deepen information sharing and informed that additional funding had been approved. ... The discussion also covered the changing role of the Tunisian security forces and Tunisian government's efforts to counter radical influences in Tunisian population".²³⁰

On December 22, 2009 DM Morjane met a visiting Congressman,²³¹ repeating the stereotypes used by the Tunisian government officials when talking with the Americans, this time about terrorism. The DM was again philosophical as he often

²²⁷ Progressive Democratic Party (*Parti Démocrate Progressiste*, PDP)

²²⁸ WikiLeaks. 'Ambassador Presses DefMin for Greater Information Sharing; Morjane Cautions Against Opposition Contacts'.

²²⁹ Imed Bahri. 'Tunisie. Les Destouriens s'agrègent autour de Kamel Morjane et El Moudaradara', *Kapitalis*, March 31, 2012. Also, 'Qui est Kamel Morjane?' *Directinfo*, November 4, 2014.

²³⁰ WikiLeaks. 'MoD Morjane: No Security Threat to US Military, Bilateral Military Relations have Improved', July 15, 2009.

²³¹ WikiLeaks. 'Representative Conaway Stresses Security Cooperation is a Two-Way Street: December 19 with the Tunisian MoD', December 22, 2009.

used to be when meeting US representatives. He talked about the common enemy that Tunisia and the US are fighting together, who:

“lays elsewhere and which can arrive at the border in unpredictable shapes including with blue eyes or carrying a Singapore passport”²³².

To the congressman’s question about the provisions taken by the government to prevent radicalisation, Morjane responded in general terms about the necessity to apply security and social measures and saying that *those who have nothing, have nothing to lose*.²³³ He also mentioned:

“the large numbers of people who go to the mosque to pray on Friday reflect the importance of Islam in Tunisia even though the government has not made the religion a rallying point for the country. Tunisian government is responding to the growing influence of Islam in Tunisia by stressing the moderate and tolerant interpretations of Islam that have traditionally prevailed”²³⁴.

It is evident that Morjane continued to carefully display to his US interlocutors his pro-American political profile for possible future developments in the country. In fact he was the successor of Abdallah as Foreign minister short before the Revolution. As far as the field of military cooperation is concerned we learned that it was not ideal as proven by the Atlas Drop Exercise²³⁵ fiasco. From this, the US found out that every minor military issue had to go through the Ben Ali palace for approval, making US cooperation with the Tunisian military more difficult than expected.

Inside the Tunisian government, two groups were acting *vis-à-vis* the US Embassy. Both, at least apparently, were following diverging policy (some times probably personal). Among the hardliners were the heads of the Interior and Finance ministries, Chamber of deputies and some deputy ministers, but above all the FM Abdallah, the shadow power of the regime.

On the other side the moderates like e.g. PM Ghannouchi and DM Morjane, were trying to keep relations of trust with the Americans. This was, either a personal initiative or at the suggestion of the palace, since according to a relevant Cable “the DM is seen as someone who can communicate effectively with US counterparts”²³⁶

²³² Ibidem.

²³³ Ibidem.

²³⁴ Ibidem.

²³⁵ Atlas Drop Exercise begun in 1996 as an annually scheduled military exercise in training areas of Tunisia with elements of the Tunisian armed forces. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/atlas-drop.htm>. (Accessed June 5, 2019).

²³⁶ WikiLeaks. ‘Ambassador Presses DefMin for Greater Information Sharing; Morjane Cautions Against Opposition Contacts’.

4.1.4. CODEL surveillance

The US Congress Delegation's (CODEL) active concern about Tunisia deserves particular attention because it shows the wider interest of the American political institutional system focused on Tunisia, beyond the US administration. CODEL's interest developed from 2007 to 2010 in a variety of items including bilateral ties, counterterrorism and NATO, economy and security, intelligence and the contested Internet freedom.

These items were repeated almost every time when Tunisian government met CODEL, visiting the country one to two times per year in 2007,²³⁷ 2008,²³⁸ 2009²³⁹ and 2010.²⁴⁰

In a May 30 to June 1, 2007 CODEL visit in Tunisia, according to the Cable²⁴¹, it was the FM Abdallah to repeat first the official line about the (presumed) government's achievements in broadening democracy and advancing freedoms and pluralism. All these were for the FM "Tunisian government's irreversible choices"²⁴² together with "Tunisia's success against terrorism and poverty while fostering moderation and tolerance"²⁴³.

When the US ambassador asked Abdallah about sharing information on counterterrorism (CT), the FM responded that CT remained a priority, while Tunisia had succeeded to eliminate terrorism.

²³⁷ WikiLeaks. 'CODEL Tanner Meetings Focus on Counterterrorism, NATO', June 6, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS710_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019). Also WikiLeaks. 'CODEL Inouye Promotes US-Tunisian Ties', November 29, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS1532_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²³⁸ WikiLeaks. 'CODEL Cramer Focuses on Economic and Security Ties', February 29, 2008. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS189_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019). Also WikiLeaks. 'Scenesetter for CODEL McCollum'. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS698_a.html, June 26, 2008 (Accessed May 5, 2019) and WikiLeaks. 'CODEL McCollum Tour d'Horizon', July 9, 2008 http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS759_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²³⁹ WikiLeaks. 'Scenesetter for the Visit of CODEL Lynch to Tunisia', September 23, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS702_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019). Also, WikiLeaks. 'Tunisia: CODEL Conaway Raises Intelligence Cooperation and Middle East Peace with Foreign Minister', December 21, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS920_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁴⁰ WikiLeaks. 'CODEL Lynch Engages Tunisian MFA on Internet Freedom', February 2, 2010. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10TUNIS84_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁴¹ WikiLeaks. 'CODEL Tanner Meetings Focus on Counterterrorism, NATO', June 6, 2007. Also WikiLeaks. 'CODEL Inouye Promotes US-Tunisian Ties', November 29, 2007.

²⁴² Ibidem.

²⁴³ Ibidem.

“The FM focused on more US businesses and wished Tunisia to be better known in the US business community. ... In the same line was also the Defence minister (DM)... Highlighting the need for US assistance... . To all this requests CODEL promised to examine Tunisia’s foreign military financing... . On CT cooperation, Tunisian government officials preferred to stick to generalities...”²⁴⁴

In a following CODEL visit on February 21-23, 2008 reported in the Cable²⁴⁵, Tunisian government officials addressed economy issues stressing the necessity for US investments in order to fight unemployment, especially amongst the youth. The need for new jobs emerged urgently, with the Tunisian authorities asking for help from the US, expressing at the same time disappointment for the 2009 US plans for military financial aid.

CODEL responded elaborating the idea about the possibility for US entrepreneurs to open franchises in Tunisia, to receive the hopes of their Tunisian interlocutors on following the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). The *tug of war* character of discussion was again present, when the Tunisian government complained for the *almost absence* of American companies, mentioning as counter-example the 2007 visit of Microsoft’s chairman.

CODEL reminded that the US companies, before investing, are used to following standards related to pre-surveys of the operability of the legal and judicial system and the country’s stability conditions. The innuendo was clear. CODEL received the answer of the Tunisian side when the tender for the renewal of Tunisair’s aircraft fleet was discussed. To CODEL’s expectations for a fair evaluation to Boeing, the Tunisian side expressed hope that Boeing will be competitive enough, but finally opted for Airbus.²⁴⁶

The remaining items in CODEL’s agenda were discussed in a meeting with the leadership of civil society that was missing freedoms due to the regime’s argument that the country was under the Al-Qaeda’s threat. The last item turning to be the favourite for Tunisian interlocutors, taking the opportunity to enforce their side in the *tug of war* reminding to the Americans the Palestinian issue, the war in Iraq, the

²⁴⁴ Ibidem.

²⁴⁵ WikiLeaks. ‘CODEL Cramer Focuses on Economic and Security Ties’, February 29, 2008.

²⁴⁶ David Kaminski-Morrow. ‘Farnborough 2008: Tunisair firms order for A350s, A330s and A320s’. *Flightglobal*, July 15, 2008. <https://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/farnborough-2008-tunisair-firms-order-for-a350s-a330s-and-225549/>. (Accessed June 4, 2019)

expected withdrawal of US troops and the US duty to invest in Africa and “promote liberty and democracy without imposing them”.²⁴⁷

The *business as usual* concept is widely prevalent in historiography for interpreting US policy in Tunisia (and elsewhere in MENA) as money and power profit oriented rather as concerned on issues as was e.g. democratisation and human rights. But the Cables show explicitly the opposite and the *business as usual* concept is disputed in favour of the *values and rights* concept.

This is evident by the Embassy’s scepticism about the Tunisian government agreement with private American companies, as it was with the Microsoft case. US ambassador Godec is expressing strong concern about the eventual misuse of the Microsoft agreement, in relation to human rights. This demonstrates that despite spread belief that points on the contrary, the US was not indifferent in front of an American IT company but was actively concerned about oppression in Tunisia and sensitive for a democratic use of IT.

The Defence minister (DM) Morjane in his meeting with CODEL member,²⁴⁸ was again in alignment with the Tunisian government, but always careful to use personal nuances in expressing his thoughts and visions:

“... Terrorists come out of the best schools in the world, he said, and fighting terrorism required a comprehensive view of things. He urged the US to begin to take into account people’s feelings in the region and to focus on ending the struggle between Israel and Palestine”.²⁴⁹

Among the key points in FM Abdallah’s meetings with CODEL was again and again the praise of Tunisia’s past achievements, repeated ritually in almost all meetings with the US representatives. Education, modernisation, promotion of moderate Islam, emancipation of women, health care and housing were among the preferable.

“However, Abdallah reiterated the concern that young Tunisians are vulnerable to Al-Qaeda propaganda, and seemed leery of the dangers of the Internet. ... Hoping Tunisia could count on US Congress for the same level of military aid received last year”.²⁵⁰

CODEL also met opposition personalities who:

“... focused mainly on the need for increased freedom of expression, though they also advocated increased freedom of association and discussed the factors contributing to low political participation. ... on the obstacles faced by independent political parties, ranging from limited access to the media to voter apathy due to governmental corruption. ... The US

²⁴⁷ WikiLeaks. ‘CODEL Cramer Focuses on Economic and Security Ties’.

²⁴⁸ WikiLeaks. ‘Scenesetter for CODEL McCollum’.

²⁴⁹ Ibidem.

²⁵⁰ Ibidem.

representative commented that the participants were raising issues that had not been discussed previously during his visit, and thanked them for voicing their concerns”.²⁵¹

The next CODEL visit was in December 19, 2009²⁵² with FM Abdallah and DM Morjane discussing again the same issues as before, according to the Cable: the Palestinian issue and the positive EU positions, the confidence to president Obama’s vision, as expressed in Cairo (calling Tunisia to contribute in the peace process), together with the exchange of wishes for improving trade, tourism and Tunisia’s image in the US. CODEL was careful enough to reduce the expectations for increased US aid in the next years.²⁵³

The last CODEL visit in Tunisia before the Revolution was in January 31-February 2, 2010. Tunisian government lowered this time the level of the meeting, engaging the deputy FM (DFM) to receive the US delegation. Nothing new emerged in this meeting of low expectations. CODEL pressed the Tunisian government on issues related to freedom of expression in the context of independent media, praising efforts in counterterrorism and the DFM read a statement about the regime’s achievements and visions.²⁵⁴

But as soon as the discussion tackled delicate issues related to press and Internet freedoms the praises gave place to gentle exchange of diverse ideas about human rights: a typical and recurring example of the *tug of war* character followed by the Tunisian government. The DFM defended her government’s policies on Internet, targeted at reducing the impact of fanaticism, extremism and terrorism, asking for CODEL’s backing to remove Tunisia from the list of countries restricting the Internet. CODEL’s counter arguments were based on the beneficial effects of the Internet in economic growth and smart economy, being at the same time the basis for the upgrading of news media as essential forum for civil society.

DFM insisted on the value of free operation of the non-political websites mentioning only some temporary bans of sites promoting violence or putting obstacles in the government. She promoted positions favouring the government press policies asking for constructive criticism and encouraging the idea of training journalists in the US.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ WikiLeaks. ‘CODEL McCollum Tour d’Horizon’, July 9, 2008.

²⁵² WikiLeaks. ‘Scenesetter for the Visit of CODEL Lynch to Tunisia’, September 23, 2009. Also, WikiLeaks. ‘Tunisia: CODEL Conaway Raises Intelligence Cooperation and Middle East Peace with Foreign Minister’, December 21, 2009.

²⁵³ Ibidem.

²⁵⁴ WikiLeaks. ‘CODEL Lynch Engages Tunisian MFA on Internet Freedom’, February 2, 2010.

²⁵⁵ Ibidem.

Obviously DFM's views were not compatible with what was demonstrated on the Cables, regarding human rights and press freedom.

Discussing the root causes of terrorism the DFM gave the stereotype Tunisian answers, in line to those addressed by FM Abdallah and DM Morjane, that,

"...terrorism is a result of despair, hopelessness, and ignorance ..., repeating that Tunisian government is addressing the root causes of terrorism by providing services, shelter, and economic opportunity to Tunisians".²⁵⁶

Concerning the image of Tunisia that CODEL painted, the DFM replied on the spirit of the *tug of war* insisting on the image given by the US as favouring Israel against the Palestinians, praising at the same time Obama's speech in Cairo.²⁵⁷

The same story to this was repeated in all bilateral issues of US-Tunisia relations as were those related to defence and economy, where the Tunisian government was persistently asking for financial support in terms of military equipment and investment. In this it is wrong to consider that the spirit of *business as usual* was the only governing US position,²⁵⁸ even if the Tunisair-Boeing requested deal was of such spirit, but finally unsuccessful, the Tunisians opting for Airbus.

The Cables *close* view show a clear priority of the American side to apply solid pressure for the case of human rights and freedoms in all talks with Tunisian government, represented either by the hardliners or by the moderates.

The American stance in all talks with the Tunisian government was constant and coherent in the quest for democratisation and human rights during the whole period treated in this research. This is shown in the Cables by the position of the Embassy, the repeated CODEL visits and the meetings with high-level members of US administration with Ben Ali and his government.

The government response to this was a *tug of war* in order to keep distant these *annoying* US concerns. In all meetings, the Tunisian hardliners and moderates were repetitively turning the discussion (either hardly or softly) into the unfulfilled US responsibilities in the Middle East. Also, into the urgent needs for the expected but not arriving US investments and military aid, recalling instead ritually the Tunisian historic achievements in education, secularism and emancipation of women or the fight against terrorism, usually avoiding exchange of intelligence information with the

²⁵⁶ Ibidem.

²⁵⁷ Ibidem.

²⁵⁸ Ian Black. 'An uncriticised success', *The Guardian*, November 8, 2007.

US. The Tunisian government was often unaware of US partnership projects (e.g. the MEPI).

4.1.5. *The American School*

The case of the American School in Tunis was a typical issue of friction between the US and Tunisian government with strong political context: the case of the American Cooperative School of Tunis (ACST), subject of dispute in the 2009. From tax obstacles²⁵⁹ to negotiations,²⁶⁰ the delays in the deal²⁶¹ to the US official rising of the issue,²⁶² the American School reflected attitudes and second thoughts in a sensitive case for the overall US-Tunisia relations. The following Cables on the ACTS are particularly interesting and revealing.

From the Cable²⁶³ of April 7, 2009, we learn that few weeks earlier, on March 26, the Foreign affairs ministry (MFA) had announced to the ambassador the content of a document about the ACST, provided by the Finance ministry (MOF). In that document, MOF attempted to sustain a tax assessment on the ACST. A day before, the US Department of State received from the Tunisian Embassy in Washington a copy of the document.

To the ambassador's surprise the MFA was assuring that the issue had not political context but only fiscal reference. The Tunisian government's official notification of the document in Washington showed that, according to FM Abdallah's theory about what should be the *little* and *big* things in the US-Tunisian relations, the ACTS issue was definitely a *big* thing for the regime.

The ambassador read the MOF document stating that this action was received by the US as political. He provided his interlocutors with a non-paper on the ACST case, as cleared in the State Department, mentioning the privileged status the school has enjoyed since its establishment half a century ago. The MOF considered the US

²⁵⁹ WikiLeaks. 'The GoT Sticks to its Story: The American School's Tax Issue is Technical – Not Political', April 7, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS217_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁶⁰ WikiLeaks. 'American School Crisis Abates, Time for Negotiations', April 17, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS237_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁶¹ WikiLeaks. 'Tunis American School, Negotiations Fruitful, but No Deal Yet', May 12, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS286_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁶² WikiLeaks. 'Ambassador Raises the American Community School with Minister of State Ben Dhia' July 9, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS456_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁶³ WikiLeaks. 'The GoT Sticks to its Story: The American School's Tax Issue is Technical – Not Political', April 7, 2009.

arguments unsustainable, ignoring the fact that the ACST was in preparations to celebrate on May its fiftieth anniversary, as a symbol of the US-Tunisian friendship. To the US warnings that the issue was of major importance for the US and an eventual closure of ACST would cause in Washington a review of US-Tunisia relations in all aspects with the involvement of the US Congress (a frequent interlocutor of the Tunisian government), the Tunisian answer was insisting: the issue was technical.

The Tunisians claimed decisively that they wanted to keep good relations with the US asking the ambassador not to make the case political. To the US warnings for negative coverage of the ACST issue in the international media, the MFA answer was again that “We shouldn’t be talking about the school’s closure”.²⁶⁴

Long negotiations started on the issue under mounting US and international pressure. Obviously this was another very clear example of the *tug of war* characterising US-Tunisia relations. In the Cable²⁶⁵ there are descriptions about the Tunisian reactions on the US pressure: the MFA jointly with FOM informed members of the foreign diplomatic delegations in Tunis, in an unusual initiative to explain its positions, assuring to keep the School open. In the assurances commitments were added, given personally by the Tunisian Prime, Foreign and Finance ministers, published in the local press.

It was clear that the Tunisian side was using a *big* thing for negotiating with the US *little* things (related to human rights and freedoms, according to Abdallah’s theory) the Americans were promoting in the US-Tunisian relations, inappropriately according to the Tunisian regime.

The Embassy asked urgently the Department of State to send an official delegation for assisting with the discussions about the ACST issue.²⁶⁶ On the morning of April 15, the day of the meeting of the Tunisian Prime minister Ghannouchi with the US Special envoy for Middle East, the relevant Cable²⁶⁷ recalls that the daily papers published the Finance minister’s conference given the day before on the country’s economy.

²⁶⁴ Ibidem.

²⁶⁵ WikiLeaks. ‘American School Crisis Abates, Time for Negotiations’, April 17, 2009.

²⁶⁶ Ibidem.

²⁶⁷ WikiLeaks. ‘Tunis American School, Negotiations Fruitful, but No Deal Yet’, May 12, 2009.

The topic of the press conference that was highlighted most in the newspapers was the ACST. Responding to journalists' questions about the possible closure of the School and *Why now?* the minister assured for the routine character of the issue. The US ambassador was sceptical asking for a period of calm to negotiate, warning at the same time that difficulties "remain ahead".²⁶⁸

Under growing US and international pressure, the Cable²⁶⁹ reports that the Tunisian government started finally to negotiate, with the US Embassy being careful. Godec was prepared for long and complicated work to come with the engagement in controversial discussions as it was used to be with the interlocutors of the Tunisian regime.

"After painful negotiations, ... Tunisian government has come a long way from its initial position ... to ensure ACST's continued service for another fifty years. On July 9, 2009 ... the US Embassy had delivered to the MFA the text of a draft agreement... The ambassador stressed the view that all issues must be agreed before any are agreed upon, explaining that the issue had the attention of Washington and needed to be resolved quickly and amicably".²⁷⁰

The American School issue seems clearly to be a point of the Tunisian regime's counter pressure on the US policy about the situation in the country. Apparently it was orchestrated by the ever-present FM Abdallah to *push* on a sensitive topic for the Americans. This dispute gave the opportunity to the US foreign policy to explicitly impose its influence on an open *bras de fer* type dispute.

The School issue should also be seen in the frame of the long American educational interest in Tunisia, forged in the era of *Bourguibism*. Few months after the outbreak of the ACST issue the US ambassador mentions the need of advancing US-referenced education and training for young Tunisians. The known *popular* Cable sent, few days before the end of his mission, by Godec in July 19, 2009 "What should we do?" is eloquent:

"In addition, we should offer serious engagement in high-priority areas for Tunisians that will also benefit the US, including: more, and more comprehensive, English-language programs; PhD scholarships for Tunisian students to study in the US, such as those that USAID used to make available in the 1970's and 1980's; more support for University linkages; more S&T exchanges; to give substance to a bilateral S&T agreement that, with no money behind it, has had little impact; and more cultural programming".²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Ibidem.

²⁶⁹ WikiLeaks. 'Ambassador Raises the American Community School with Minister of State Ben Dhia' July 9, 2009.

²⁷⁰ Ibidem.

²⁷¹ WikiLeaks. 'Troubled Tunisia: What Should We Do?' July 19, 2009.

The American School issue was an important turning point in Godec's *tug of war* with Abdallah's policy to keep Americans distant from issues bothering the regime. A key case conflict resolved by the US Embassy diplomatic determination and Washington's decisive actions. A conflict typical of the *passing the blame game* of Tunisian government with the US on a subject very sensitive for the American presence in Tunisia in the field of education, another constant of the US long-term concern, prevailing also in Tunisia's post-Revolution era.²⁷²

4.2. Human rights – Press freedom

The theme of Human rights and Press freedom in Tunisia, during the *third* period, remained at the top of the American agenda. Three topics entitled *The League*, *The Journalists* and *Mohamed Abbou* set representative stories based on the content of selected relevant Cables.

The first topic (*The League*), having attracted the US *close* view interest, is set around a principal example of oppression against an important non-governmental organisation defending the fundamental rules of civil society.

The second topic (*The Journalists*) is the recounting of the journalists' struggle to organise a difficult task: the creation of an independent association aiming to safeguard the profession of journalist and their right to defend personal dignity, in the context of human rights. In this second topic the conditions of control of information media and networks by the Tunisian government, and the ambiguity of sector leadership are reflected.

Hardliners at the centre of the Tunisian regime are present also in this topic. Thanks to the Cables, these persons confirm their multiple roles, on one hand controlling the internal oppression and abuse of power and on the other trying to keep the US attention distant.

The personal story of a prominent exponent of Tunisian dissent is the third topic of the theme (*Mohamed Abbou*). It is an example of the explicit US involvement to defend actively the individual rights as well. This recount proves the determination of

²⁷² Wagdy Sawahel. 'Tunis to host first American university in the Maghreb'. *University World News*, Africa Edition, February 6, 2015.

<https://universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20150205142505126> (Accessed June 27, 2019).

Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies keeps also an Office in Tunisia.

<http://cmestunisia.fas.harvard.edu> (Accessed June 27, 2019), as well as Columbia University host in Tunis one of Columbia Global Centers. <https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/tunis> (Accessed June 27, 2019).

the US *close* view to defend *in situ* and openly the human rights and press freedom. A very representative attitude for defending the new American concepts emerged in the *third* period, as shown in the Cables.

In the field of human rights the attitude of the members of the Tunisian government was often ambiguous in their contacts with the Americans. Even the hardliners, who often spearheaded the *tug of war* with the US officials, were sometimes softened after their removal from office, as was the case of the Interior minister in Abbou's affair in 2007. In this political milieu should be added the weak and inexperienced opposition parties (though often headed by important personalities) those either cooperating or opposing the Tunisian government.

The strong and influencing labour union leadership was also politically ambiguous as were many journalists confused and sceptical to *preserve ideas or preserve themselves?*²⁷³

4.2.1. The League

The activities of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), leader organisation in defending Human rights in Tunisia, (awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2015)²⁷⁴ attracted strong US attention in the years 2006,²⁷⁵ 2007²⁷⁶ and 2009.²⁷⁷ On May 27, 2006, a national LTDH congress was violently cancelled by security forces, the relevant Cable²⁷⁸ recalling that, despite the recognition of the LTDH as a legal NGO, its annual congress has not been held since 2000.

²⁷³ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Journalists Face Choice Between Preserving Ideals or Preserving Themselves', January 30, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS64_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁷⁴ LTDH was founded in 1976, with three thousand members in 1985. A member of the *National Dialogue Quartet* laureate of the 2015 Nobel Prize, together with UGTT, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, the Trade and Handicrafts and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/summary>. (Accessed June 4, 2019).

²⁷⁵ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Human Rights League Congress Violently Blocked', May 30, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS1308_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019). Also, WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Human Rights League Quagmire Continues', June 12, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS1425_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁷⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Human Rights League Optimistic Amid Some Signs of Progress', July 26, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS1004_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁷⁷ WikiLeaks. 'GoT Impedes Tunisian Human Rights League Meeting', January 27, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS61_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁷⁸ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Human Rights League Congress Violently Blocked', May 30, 2006. Also, WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Human Rights League Quagmire Continues', June 12, 2006.

This time the LTDH leadership was firm on its decision to hold the congress, after delays and cancellations and despite the congress being banned after a petition by LTDH members. Those members close to the pro-Tunisian government party²⁷⁹ won a case asking the Justice ministry to authorize the security forces to prevent the congress, for reasons related to LTDH internal disputes. On the eve of the decided date for the congress opening,

“US and other western diplomats received telephone calls from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and *Notes verbales* recommending that for safety concerns they avoid the venue and its vicinity. US diplomats, along with European colleagues, witnessed security agents who had turned out in force to block access to LTDH headquarters beat several people who appeared to be trying to attend”.²⁸⁰

A day before, on May 26, the US ambassador received a call from the Foreign affairs ministry (MFA),²⁸¹ informing about the prevention of the LTDH congress. The MFA asked US diplomats to avoid approaching the area of the venue for safety reasons.

Abdallah, as the head of MFA sent *Notes verbales* to all foreign missions exposing the disputes within the LTDH as an internal affair of the *League* with no relation to the government.

The warning was addressed to all diplomats and foreign nationals. Both US ambassador and the political Counsellor of the European Commission responded to the MFA that considered the *Notes verbales* as an advice, deciding in any case to send observers. The Cable²⁸² description is explicit:

“On May 27, a US diplomat, accompanied by British colleague, attempted to go to LTDH headquarters in downtown Tunis, to the congress venue. Upon arrival ... there was a heavy police presence, and at least one hundred individuals who appeared to be civilian clothed police. The police denied access... Serious incidents happened involving European Union diplomats, parliamentarians and a French senator accompanied by two judges. Police violence was also consumed on passing citizens and foreign journalist”.²⁸³

In the meanwhile, the government continued to insist about the internal character of the LTDH crisis and the need to apply the rule of law, while the activists of human rights were alleging abuse by the security forces.²⁸⁴ The point worth noticing in this issue is that,

²⁷⁹ Democratic Constitutional Rally (*Rassemblement Constitutionnelle Démocratique*, RCD).

²⁸⁰ WikiLeaks. ‘Tunisian Human Rights League Congress Violently Blocked’, May 30, 2006. Also, WikiLeaks. ‘Tunisian Human Rights League Quagmire Continues’, June 12, 2006.

²⁸¹ Ibidem.

²⁸² Ibidem.

²⁸³ Ibidem.

²⁸⁴ Ibidem.

“the incidents of violence at LTDH congress mark the first time in recent years that US Embassy officers have witnessed such abuse first hand. The events also mark the first time that Tunisian government attempted to warn off foreign observers”.²⁸⁵

It was now clear that the US Embassy was decisive to follow *in situ* the human rights campaigns, as did later in Bizerte on October 5, 2006 ignoring the government’s suggestions. The LTDH crisis and the events followed the decision of its leadership to run the congress, inactive since 2000, ignoring the government ban, despite the legal status of the organisation, became a *cause célèbre* for the European Union (the EU funding for LTDH has been blocked for years). The Cable²⁸⁶ recalls the presence of EU observers who were also vocal, pointing at the absence from the events of the French diplomacy and adding the mild statement released by the *Quai d’Orsay* with concerns about the LTDH’s affair.

“Nevertheless on May 30, local Tunisian government-influenced newspapers headlined Ben Ali’s acceptance of awards from three European organizations, including a section of the prestigious *Institute de France*”.²⁸⁷

Discussions with individuals, involved in the LTDH crisis, arrived at the conclusion that the repression will follow for indefinite time ahead.

The US ambassador was again active on the issue talking on June 8,²⁸⁸ with a former Tunisian minister who was serving among the mediators between the leadership of LTDH and its pro-government members. The ambassador’s interlocutor was pessimistic about the problems the LTDH was facing, because of the Tunisian government’s strong position to prevent any organised activity in favour of human rights. He argued that the LTDH would be kept in a state of *legal limbo*.²⁸⁹

“Given the impasse, the LTDH leader met with US Deputy State Secretary during his May 18-19 visit to Tunis, asked that the US continue its pressure on Tunisian government. He explained that Ben Ali relies on the fact that the US -and other Western governments- will only engage periodically on human rights and democracy issues. Tunisian government must feel that its international relationships are at risk if any change is to result, said the head of LTDH”.²⁹⁰

The LTDH was keeping contacts with the US. During a July 23, 2006 meeting,²⁹¹ the LTDH leader told US ambassador that, the organisation was ready to discuss any

²⁸⁵ Ibidem.

²⁸⁶ Ibidem.

²⁸⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸⁸ Ibidem.

²⁸⁹ Ibidem.

²⁹⁰ Ibidem.

²⁹¹ WikiLeaks. ‘Human Rights League Optimistic Amid Some Signs of Progress’, July 26, 2007.

solution. He confirmed that he had written to Ben Ali informing him on the LTDH leadership's readiness to find a solution, with sole condition that the League would maintain political independence, and that it would be allowed to continue its efforts to defend human rights in the country.

US ambassador Godec was very active for the case of LTDH, trying to use his influence. He repeated the American support for independent Tunisian civil society, including the LTDH, and the expectation for more freedom of expression and association in Tunisia. He talked with FM Abdallah about the LTDH who reassured that "Ben Ali wants an end to the LTDH crisis"²⁹². The US Embassy, decisive to pressure in this direction, soon realised that the Tunisian regime continued to oppress LTDH. The most probable reason was Ben Ali's belief that *the US and the EU are only occasionally concerned about human rights*.²⁹³

"After the case of the released well-known activist Mohamed Abbou, the LTDH crisis has probably attracted the most negative attention to the human rights situation in Tunisia. ... LTDH leadership and others in Tunisian civil society were now most optimistic about the prospects for change".²⁹⁴

The dispute about LTDH continued for a long time. On January 23, 2009,²⁹⁵ the government's bans continue: the Secretary General of the Organization for Coordination between the Human Rights Leagues in the Maghreb, which was established recently, was prevented from entering the country.

Tunisian security did not allow his meeting with LTDH and the Secretary General had no answer to his open protest to Ben Ali, while local media also remained silent. The LTDH was *de facto* banned, even if it got permission "to participate in demonstrations protesting the violence in Gaza".²⁹⁶

The permanent US attention for democratisation and human rights was so persistent that brought the Embassy's physical presence in the scenes of the events, not only in Tunis but also in the rest of the country (e.g. in Bizerte). This was the very case with the US support given *in situ* to LTDH, defending its right for undisturbed operation, which was not in the intentions of the Tunisian government.

²⁹² Ibidem.

²⁹³ Ibidem.

²⁹⁴ Ibidem.

²⁹⁵ WikiLeaks. 'GoT Impedes Tunisian Human Rights League Meeting', January 27, 2007.

²⁹⁶ Ibidem.

The US Embassy in the issues related to press freedom and to relevant individual cases of dissent, as was the Abbou case, also implemented the same practice.

4.2.2. *The Journalists*

The role of journalists in Tunisia's press freedom issue is directly related to human rights. US focus on this issue was continuous from 2005 to 2009. Journalists' reaction against Abdallah's appointment as the new Foreign minister (FM) in 2005²⁹⁷ recalls the problems the US had experienced with him, soon after he took office. US followed with interest the journalists' efforts to join the sole and strong labour confederation, General Union of Tunisian Workers (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*, UGTT)²⁹⁸, in 2006²⁹⁹ blocked by Tunisian government in 2007.³⁰⁰ In late 2007 journalists' efforts for international contacts found obstacles³⁰¹ and in early 2008 discussions about journalists Tunisian government-puppeteers attracted the close view US attention shown by the relevant Cable.³⁰² A year before the Revolution the situation becomes worse for journalists who now wonder about *preserving ideals or preserving themselves?*³⁰³ On August 17, 2005,³⁰⁴ Ben Ali appointed Abdallah as the Foreign minister. For fifteen years he was the president's closest advisor (almost from the beginning of Ben Ali's presidency), the head of Information and the man behind the strict control over the media. Abdallah's appearance as the head of Tunisian diplomacy created much discussion, because of his limited experience in international relations (except the two

²⁹⁷ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Journalists React Negatively to New Foreign Minister', August 31, 2005. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05TUNIS1915_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

²⁹⁸ UGTT was founded in 1946 by Farhat Hached, with half million members (2011). Member of the *National Dialogue Quartet* laureate of the 2015 Nobel Prize, together with LTDH, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, the Trade and Handicrafts and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/summary>. (Accessed June 4, 2019).

²⁹⁹ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Journalists Union One Step Closer to Operation', December 5, 2006. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS2844_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³⁰⁰ WikiLeaks. 'Journalists of Tunisia (Try to) Unite', November 29, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS1531_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³⁰¹ WikiLeaks. 'Telling It Like It Is: Tunisian Journalists Discuss Media', December 13, 2007. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS1575_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³⁰² WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Journalists Union – Puppet Theater?', February 8, 2008. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS126_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³⁰³ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Journalists Face Choice Between Preserving Ideals or Preserving Themselves', January 30, 2009. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS64_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³⁰⁴ WikiLeaks. 'Tunisian Journalists React Negatively to New Foreign Minister', August 31, 2005.

years spent as ambassador to London). His previous duties were to control all information in the country, including press, even the editorials and news content, not hesitating to censor.

Journalists of various political alignments, interlocutors with the US Embassy argued that Abdallah's appointment as FM was because he was considered by Ben Ali as the right person to handle foreign issues up to and during the November 2005 World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) hosted in Tunis.

Other journalists expressed the opinion that Abdallah's record in controlling information was his accreditation for the position as the *leader propagandist* in Foreign affairs. The same journalists, however, pointed out that because Abdallah enjoyed low esteem by those aware of his career as the head persecutor of press freedom (including foreign diplomats), his selection as the new FM was a big mistake. In any case, most journalists agreed that the only person really responsible for lack of freedom of expression in Tunisia was Ben Ali himself, and whatever his channels of control would be, Abdallah or the Interior minister, "the press will remain muzzled"³⁰⁵.

But despite the journalists' pessimism,

"the US believed in 2005 that Abdallah's new position as FM will provide multiple new opportunities to raise the mission priority of press freedom in Tunisia with the one person (other than Ben Ali) who is most responsible for the sad situation of the media in the country"³⁰⁶.

This Cable gives another dimension to Abdallah's leading implication in the regime's oppressing policies, showing how the combination of Cables adds additional information on persons and facts related with the US active interest about the Tunisian situation of the period led to the Revolution.

On November 28, 2006,³⁰⁷ the Tunisian Journalists Union (*Syndicat Journalistes Tunisiens*, SJT), founded in 2004 and counting a hundred sixty members, not yet authorized by the Tunisian government, begun efforts to join the UGTT. The UGTT was interested on SJT endeavour because even if it included an Information union with membership from all type of media, it has never had a journalists' union member.³⁰⁸ The US Embassy was cautious about this venture:

³⁰⁵ Ibidem.

³⁰⁶ Ibidem.

³⁰⁷ Ibidem.

³⁰⁸ Ibidem.

“The alliance with the UGTT, whose leadership is widely believed to be under the influence of Tunisian government, is a risky proposition for SJT members, who are independent voices in the lacklustre domestic media environment. ... The UGTT announcement that it will work with the SJT, including its head, to establish a journalists’ union is a major step, particularly as SJT has a specific focus on increasing freedom of expression and protecting independent journalists”.³⁰⁹

On December 1, 2006 some optimistic estimation were entrusted to the US Embassy by the SJT leader,

“that the UGTT announcement appears to be the result of SJT international lobbying ... SJT will lose a little or perhaps a lot of its independence, but at the same time UGTT will give the members courage and power. If the UGTT plays its traditional role in protecting labour rights, the result will be good for journalists”.³¹⁰

But the Embassy is still rather sceptical, commenting:

“The establishment of a truly independent legal journalists’ union could be a significant step towards increased freedom of expression in Tunisia. However, historically, Tunisian government has seized every opportunity to prevent independent organizations from gaining domestic support or legitimacy”.³¹¹

In 2007, difficulties appeared again in the horizon that resulted the Embassy’s awareness, as reported in the Cable.³¹² The SJT efforts to join the UGTT were made futile by the obstacles put by the government, discouraging UGTT to cooperate with the SJT.

The regime went further, engineering the upgrade of the pro-government Tunisian Journalists Association (*Association des Journalistes Tunisiens*, AJT) to get the status of union, aiming at an undervalued SJT. The AJT easily got permission to hold its congress in contrast to the difficulties the SJT had with the authorities.³¹³

After it was upgraded to union, the AJT became the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (*Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens*, SNJT):

“The SNJT/AJT’s unionization was viewed as a significant blow to the SJT. Among the fears was the jeopardizing of SJT’s standing with international organizations and the facilitating Tunisian government to marginalize SJT domestically”.³¹⁴

As explained in the Cable³¹⁵ the Americans in Tunis realise now how difficult it was for the journalists to continue working as dignified professionals under Ben Ali’s

³⁰⁹ Ibidem.

³¹⁰ Ibidem.

³¹¹ Ibidem.

³¹² Ibidem.

³¹³ Ibidem.

³¹⁴ Ibidem.

³¹⁵ WikiLeaks. ‘Journalists of Tunisia (Try to) Unite’, November 29, 2007.

regime. The international pressures for press freedom seemed to affect little the oppressive information policy of the Tunisian government, but the US Embassy expresses some hopes:

“Without a union, however, the average reporter is left to bear the full brunt of Tunisian government pressure. The role the international community can play is limited, and ultimately the ability of domestic journalism to evolve hinges on the creation of an independent legal union, which does not seem likely in the near future”.³¹⁶

On December 10,³¹⁷ new initiatives from MEPI attracted the journalists’ interest: the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)-funded International Research and Exchanges Board/Middle East North Africa (IREX/MENA)³¹⁸ Media Project, held a roundtable discussion with Tunisian journalists. The topic of the meeting was the local media and regional IREX activities, which attracted the interest of a number of journalists for IREX-sponsored training. However, all agreed that holding such training in Tunisia would be problematic:

“The US Embassy commenting, the sad reality is that the problems of freedom of expression in Tunisia cannot be resolved by training more journalists. Until Tunisian government eases up on its nearly complete control of the domestic media, there will be no public debate on issues of importance. ... The Embassy sends some journalists to the US as part of the International Visitor program and funds a program for journalists to study English”.³¹⁹

On January 14, 2008, as reported in the relevant Cable,³²⁰ the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) praised the developments favouring the SNJT. The new union organised a congress that was viewed by some as historic reform and by others as little more than a government staged *puppet theatre*.³²¹

The congress resulted on contrasted comments by journalists from various political standpoints. They had expressed on one hand some reservations, but on the other they had stressed the large participation of younger journalists.³²² The same observers acclaimed the surprisingly *free and frank* debate on many aspects of matters concerning Tunisian journalism, as, e.g., press freedom, American hegemony etc. Interestingly the new SNJT president, after having declined meetings with any

³¹⁶ Ibidem.

³¹⁷ WikiLeaks. ‘Telling It Like It Is: Tunisian Journalists Discuss Media’, December 13, 2007.

³¹⁸ <https://www.irex.org/middle-east-north-africa> (Accessed May 24, 2019).

³¹⁹ WikiLeaks. ‘Telling It Like It Is: Tunisian Journalists Discuss Media’.

³²⁰ WikiLeaks. ‘Tunisian Journalists Union – Puppet Theater?’ February 8, 2008.

³²¹ Ibidem.

³²² Ibidem.

American or French officer was ready to meet with the USAID project advisor³²³ to whom he disclosed three key points.³²⁴ First, he claimed a quiet support (as yet unconfirmed) from members of the SJT, including its leader. Second, he emphasised his first steps in office, which included the establishment of a website for publishing censored articles, and Third, he talked about a letter sent to Ben Ali by his board members, which apparently had alarmed some members of government leadership. This disclosure to a member of the US mission shows the impact of the US presence in Tunis, proving that this presence and attention was not at all *degraded* (as the contrary is postulated in historiography), in the *third* period of post-Independence Tunisia. On the issue of SNJT,

“in short, US Embassy considers it is still unclear how independent SNJT really is or what will happen to SJT. ... But only time will tell if the puppets have managed to cut the strings in establishing the new Tunisian journalists union”.³²⁵

A real dilemma arisen among journalists was now phrased: *Preserving ideals or preserving themselves?*³²⁶. Pressures to journalists were reported from the beginning of 2009, the year of presidential elections in Tunisia. They suffered threats and insults to align their work according to the pro-government party directives.

Although many journalists were forced to obey the ruling party orders, they ignored the consequences of disobeying and continued working according to their own beliefs.

“The US Embassy received many documented protests from journalist and reporters (even working for international press) about government-security assaults, temporarily detentions, longer arrests, blackmailing to forced collaboration, home surrounding, police following, threats for loosing job, false claims for *committed* crimes etc”.³²⁷

On January 20, 2009³²⁸ protesting unfair labour methods, more than a hundred and fifty journalists and technicians of the state broadcasting organisation began a ten days long sit-in. The turmoil was felt and upon his request the US Embassy officers met with a freelance journalist, on January 28. He complained of (alleged) harassment by security forces, but his behaviour during the meeting had convinced the US

³²³ Foreign Service National Advisory Corps. <https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/400/495maa>. (Accessed June 3, 2019)

³²⁴ WikiLeaks. ‘Tunisian Journalists Union – Puppet Theater?’.

³²⁵ Ibidem.

³²⁶ WikiLeaks. ‘Tunisian Journalists Face Choice Between Preserving Ideals or Preserving Themselves’, January 30, 2009.

³²⁷ Ibidem.

³²⁸ Ibidem.

officers about the existence of informants or government's employees in the service of watching the Embassy's activity in the field of press freedom.³²⁹

It was evident that the government was decisive to follow a hard line on the press freedom dispute showing explicitly its distrust to the US Embassy's initiatives to keep a *close* view on the issue.

4.2.3. Mohamed Abbou

An individual case of the human rights issue in Tunisia, unrolling from 2006 to 2009, is worth examining in the *close* view focus of relevant Cables. Mohamed Abbou³³⁰ was jailed in 2005 after criticising the Tunisian government. The US Embassy paid close attention to his case updating the issue in 2006³³¹ and met his wife Samia,³³² while Abbou was still in jail. In mid-2007 Abbou was released from prison keeping contacts with the US Embassy and ready to continue anti-governmental activism.³³³

Since his release the regime prevented Abbou's travelling abroad, the last in 2009 becoming an international issue.³³⁴ Abbou, and his wife, play a prominent political role in the post-Revolution Tunisia.³³⁵ Mohamed Abbou, as the relevant Cable³³⁶ reports, without a history of political opposition, was jailed for having posted two Internet articles criticising the Tunisian government, Ben Ali and his family.

³²⁹ Ibidem.

³³⁰ Mohamed Abbou (Tunis, 1966), a lawyer and politician, he was a prominent dissident personality in the late period of Ben Ali's regime. A militant for human rights and social justice, he was jailed for three years (2005-2008) for having published an article against the president. He was a most representative figure of Tunisian dissent, attracting the active concern and support of the US Embassy, European countries and international human rights institutions.

³³¹ WikiLeaks. 'Abbou Update', March 28, 2006.
http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS730_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³³² WikiLeaks. 'Samia Abbou: GoT Pressure Less Since Ganzoui's Departure', July 3, 2006.
http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS1658_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³³³ WikiLeaks. 'Mohamed Abbou to Continue Activism for Freedom in Tunisia', August 3, 2007.
http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TUNIS1044_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³³⁴ WikiLeaks. 'Mohamed Abbou Prevented from Travelling for the 6th Time', March 5, 2009.
http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TUNIS126_a.html (Accessed May 5, 2019).

³³⁵ Abbou was a member of the *Congress for the Republic* (CPR), referred as *El Mottamar*, a centre-left secular political party created in 2001, but legal only after the Revolution (2011), founded and long-term lead by Moncef Marzouki. CPR was second in seats in the Constituent Assembly and later cooperated with *En-Nahdha* and *Ettakatol*. Dissolved in 2017 merging in *Al-Irada (The Will, MTV)* founded in 2015 by Moncef Marzouki. (Various web sources. Accessed May 25, 2019).

³³⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Abbou Update', March 28, 2006.

Abbou's case was intensively and supportively followed by the local and international human rights organisations. The leader of LTDH called Abbou as the *most flagrant example* of Tunisia's level of respecting the human rights.³³⁷

On March 11, 2006, Abbou started a second hunger strike protesting harassment and restriction on his family visits.³³⁸

"NGO representatives, human rights activists, and [his wife] Samia continue to seek US government assistance in efforts to free Mohamed Abbou. ... Although US Embassy points to public statements and multiple demarches on the Abbou case as examples of US efforts on his behalf, the *Free Abbou* community will continue to seek US government intervention as long as he remains imprisoned".³³⁹

In a June 30, 2007 meeting, according to the relevant Cable,³⁴⁰ Abbou's wife Samia told a US Embassy officer that herself and her family felt government harassment to diminish after the removal from his duties of the Interior minister, on June 5.

However, she complained about her husband's suffering due to poor detention conditions and asked for further US government support for his release.

While Samia Abbou noted positive developments in her treatment, the Tunisian government continued to be upset with Abbou, as it was clear to the US Embassy.

The US deputy secretary of State received the denial of FM Abdallah to discuss about Abbou, the Foreign affairs ministry insisting that "he was charged only for assault".³⁴¹

"While Abbou remains the most high profile political prisoner in Tunisia, Tunisian government appears in no hurry to rid itself of this stain on its human rights record. However, continued pressure from the US government, the EU ... and international and Tunisian civil society could lead to an early release of Abbou, via a presidential pardon ...".³⁴²

Abbou was released from jail on July 24, 2007,³⁴³ after two years of a three-and-a-half year sentence. On July 31, 2007, US Embassy officers met him, who, together with his wife, expressed appreciation for the US support, saying, "The Americans were, thus far, the only diplomats to visit [him] personally".³⁴⁴ Samia was explicitly conscious about the Embassy interventions and care. She loudly opposed those that

³³⁷ Commission Arabe des Droits Humains. 'Procès de Maître Mohamed Abbou. Jeudi 28 avril 2005. Tribunal de Tunis', May 3, 2005. <http://fr.achr.eu/rapports/process-de-maitre-mohamed-abbou-jeudi-28-avril-2005-tribunal-de-tunis/> (Accessed June 30, 2019).

³³⁸ Ibidem.

³³⁹ Ibidem.

³⁴⁰ WikiLeaks. 'Samia Abbou: GoT Pressure Less Since Ganzoui's Departure', July 3, 2006.

³⁴¹ Ibidem.

³⁴² Ibidem.

³⁴³ WikiLeaks. 'Mohamed Abbou to Continue Activism for Freedom in Tunisia', August 3, 2007.

³⁴⁴ Ibidem.

“had questioned the US government’s contribution to human rights promotion in Tunisia”,³⁴⁵ the Abbous mentioning:

“public statements, moral support, frequent visits by US Embassy officers, and the Embassy’s interventions with Tunisian government over allegations of harassment and prison conditions”³⁴⁶

Abbou expressed his will to personally thank the ambassador for the US support and to attend events organised by the Embassy in order to present his own experience. In addition the Abbous did not fail to thank for the efforts and support received from the European Union (EU).

“While in prison, Abbou was a *cause célèbre* for the international human rights community, highlighting the disparity between Tunisian government rhetoric on human rights and its actions. ... Abbou vowed to be just as active as he was before his incarceration, and his recent appearances on several pan-Arab satellite TV channels lead the US Embassy to believe he means what he says”³⁴⁷.

Tunisian government security continued watching Abbou’s activities preventing him from traveling abroad on March 3, 2009.³⁴⁸ The US Embassy assumed that the continued restrictions on Abbou might be linked with the regime’s reactions to criticisms received for the preparations of the presidential and legislative elections of 2009. The removing of obstacles for Abbou’s ability to travel abroad seemed to be possible after the Dutch government officially invited him in the Netherlands. The US Embassy supported the Dutch Embassy on its project, but the Americans believed that a US joint effort with the EU could produce more drastic effect.³⁴⁹

In addition to the Tunisian government official contacts with US Embassy, many other are mentioned in the Cables: personalities from politics, the labour union and journalism. The US Embassy talked with leaders and head members of the labour union, pro-Tunisian government and opposing the government journalists and their associations, former moderate members of the ruling party and leaders of parties close to Tunisian government and in opposition, the active head of Microsoft Tunisia³⁵⁰ and

³⁴⁵ Ibidem.

³⁴⁶ Ibidem.

³⁴⁷ Ibidem.

³⁴⁸ WikiLeaks. ‘Mohamed Abbou Prevented from Travelling for the 6th Time’, March 5, 2009.

³⁴⁹ Ibidem.

³⁵⁰ Salwa Smaoui joined Microsoft Tunisia in January 2006 for a five years stint. In 2011 she was appointed Microsoft director of Advertisement & Online for Middle East and Africa and since 2014 she was Microsoft Business Group General Manager for Windows & Surface in Western Europe Region. Since early 2016 she is the Microsoft Middle East & Africa Government Business Leader. <https://www.wise-qatar.org/biography/salwa-smaoui/> (Accessed May 24, 2019). Smaoui is married to the media-advertisement businessman Nabil Karoui, head of the *Karoui & Karoui Group* and of the

activists of human rights. Some of these persons and family members became leading figures in the post-Revolution Tunisia, in politics, business, mass media and civil society.

In the post-Revolution period Mohamed Abbou was actively involved in politics, with his wife Samia, creating in 2013 the Democratic Current (*Courant Démocrate*, CD) a centre-left/social-democratic party, referred as *Attayar*, with parliamentary representation. Abbou is the candidate of his party in the presidential elections of November 17, 2019.³⁵¹

4.3. Revealing Cables

The Cables used in this research reveal the reality about the state of the US-Tunisia relations in the period 2003-2010. The contents of the selected Cables dispute the general perception that dominates in the academic historiography and journalism that the US foreign policy in that period was *degraded*, practically indifferent about Tunisia's internal affairs.

This perception is possibly enforced by the *silence* of official US public posts of the period 2002-2010 (Tunis US Embassy website). The Cables contrast the allegations about a supposedly *degrade* of the US attention on what was happening in the country with Ben Ali's regime. A regime strained by the defects in democracy and civil freedoms, human rights oppression, abuses in governance and other severe deficiencies in the internal life of the country.

It is shown in this chapter that the US presence in Tunisia was neither *degraded*, in the period 2003-2010, nor *supportive to the Ben Ali's regime*, as suggested by the historiography current based on the stereotype of the "US interventionism".³⁵² On the contrary, as it is shown in the Cables, the US attention for human rights and freedoms in Tunis was active, lively, multi-faceted and effective. The Americans were highly critical against Ben Ali's regime, using every occasion and means to voice their disapproval.

TV chain *Nessma* and founding member in 2012 of the big tent Tunisian political party *Nidaa Tounes* supported by former RCD followers, Bourguibists (Neo-Dusturians) and secularists that took the voting plurality in the 2014 elections. (Various web sources. Accessed May 25, 2019).

³⁵¹ *HuffPost Tunisie*. 'Mohamed Abbou, candidat du Courant Démocrate (Attayar) à la présidentielle', April 22, 2019. https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/mahamed-abbou-candidat-du-courant-democrate-attayar-a-la-presidentielle_mg_5cbd8161e4b068d795ce7728. (Accessed June 5, 2019)

³⁵² Azadeh Shahshahani and Corinna Mullin, 'The legacy of US intervention and the Tunisian revolution: Promises and challenges one year on'.

US attention is not only constrained to the US Embassy but is augmented by the official delegations coming from the US. The US also did not hesitate to take actions, with physical presence in the scenes of conflicts between the regime and human rights dissidents. These US actions *in situ* surely pressured the Tunisian regime as a way to test its limits.

The Cables becoming primary sources of information about the US *close* view on Tunisia in the period 2003-2010 is the basic reference about the US-Tunisian relations. Important events (e.g. the cases of the Information Society Summit, of the League of Human Rights, of the American School, of the unionising of journalists, of Mohamed Abbou and others) can be found reported in international journals. However, all this journalistic reporting was referred to the events interesting the Tunisian internal affairs and not the US-Tunisia relations *per se*, as it is the subject examined in this thesis through the WikiLeaks Cables.

4.3.1. Counterweight strategy

For its bilateral contacts with the Americans, who were pressuring for democratisation and freedoms, the Tunisian regime soon organised its own coordinated counterweight strategy. It was a kind of *entrenchment* to face the US policy of asking for changes in Tunisia after the September 11 attacks.

The strategy was based on one hand on the projection of the Tunisian efforts to fight extremism, both political and religious (in contrast to other countries of the region) at the necessary cost of restrictions of human rights and freedoms. On the other hand was the recall of Tunisia's past achievements in building a stable secular society unique in the Arab world.

The representatives of the Tunisian government used this strategy when they were dealing with the Americans during the period of our interest 2003-2010, in all US-Tunisian meetings, of any field of interest. The target was double faceted: first, to maintain the alliance with the US strong in matters of mutual bilateral interest, and second, to always remind the Americans, in a ritual way, the pride of Tunisia's past achievements.

The first was to face the common enemy of the expanding religious radicalism, to implement counterterrorism measures and, to keep neutral the Tunisian military in the rising unquiet of the Arab world. The second was a sort of an *ethical shield* against

the pride-sensitive Americans whenever they pressured for openness, democratisation, rights and freedoms, issues that bothered the Tunisian regime.

The first strategy was realistic and effective, but the second was rather a pathetic fallacy; it was as if the Tunisians, heirs of a long history, underestimated the maturity of American sensibilities up to the level of a naive credulity. The same outdated beliefs for the American attitude seemed to prevail in the thinking of the Tunisian regime's elite when they were considering temporary the US attention about human rights in Tunisia. This was also Ben Ali's conviction as was confided to the US Embassy officers by a former Tunisian minister, discussing the LTDH issue, saying that Ben Ali believed that *the US and the EU are only occasionally concerned about human rights*.

In the frame of the strategy applied by the Tunisian regime authorities in almost all their contacts with the Americans they were also developing tactics to keep US pressure on the regime's oppressive policies distant or to look for organising reprisals when the pressure was insistent, in any respect.

The US-Tunisian disputes had a *tug of war* character, as was the case, e.g., of the American School issue, of the Abdallah's theory on the *little* and the *big* issues in bilateral relations, the *little* issues being democratisation and freedoms (that should never become *big* or be brought to the knowledge of Washington).

On the same spirit, Morjane was flattering the US ambassador by expressing pro-American sentiments when the government disapproved Godec's contacts with the Tunisian opposition. The Tunisian interlocutor's double-face behaviour in dealing *business as usual* was shown in the case of the tender for the update of Tunisair fleet, and the unusual secrecy the Tunisian government had shown when it was keeping uninformed the US Embassy on the huge deal with Microsoft, despite the diplomatic etiquette.

Sometimes the Tunisian regime also took ambitious counter-actions that would surely anger the Americans, as it was the American School dispute. This *tug of war* that starts with words, escalates to actions of mistrust by the end of the decade, destroys whatever left of the state of US-Tunisia relations and obstructs any real chance for effective communication and cooperation.

4.3.2. *The American key actor*

The key actor in this *tug of war*, at the American side, was the ambassador Robert Godec,³⁵³ serving in Tunis for three years, from May 30, 2006 to July 29, 2009. He was the main US interlocutor of the principal figures of the Ben Ali's regime, the hardliner Abdallah and the moderate Morjane.

Handling the Bizerte LTDH case in October 2006, the case of Tunisian journalists' unionising, the Abbou affair, and the Americans School issue, Godec showed values of a highly skilled diplomat, serving his mission under two US secretaries of State, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton. He was the basic implementer of the new US foreign policy in MENA, after secretary Rice's speech in Cairo, in 2005.

Godec's impact on the American stance in Tunisia was important. He was the ambassador making the *values and rights* concept prerequisite of *business as usual*, the latter prevailing in the US-Tunisian relations of the past.

Godec succeeded to be the reference US interlocutor of important representatives of many sectors of Tunisia's establishment and dissent, including, e.g., pro-government and leading opposition personalities, human rights activists, labour leaders and journalists.

Among his Cables, "Corruption in Tunisia: What's yours is mine"³⁵⁴ and the "Troubled Tunisia: What should we do?"³⁵⁵, became the most *popular* extensively referenced by both academic historiography and journalism.

4.3.3. *Anomaly to repair*

The key issue in the *third* period (2000-2010) of the US-Tunisia relations that resulted from the analysis of the selected Cables is that the Tunisian regime had not taken the new US policy seriously.

Ben Ali believed that the insistence of the Americans on democratisation and respect of freedoms in the period 2003-2010 would be occasional, underestimating the new

³⁵³ Matt Bewig. 'US Ambassador to Kenya: Who is Robert Godec?' *AllGov*, October 28, 2012. <http://www.allgov.com/news/appointments-and-registrations/us-ambassador-to-kenya-who-is-robert-godec-121028?news=846064> (Accessed June 5, 2019).

³⁵⁴ WikiLeaks. 'Corruption in Tunisia: What's yours is mine', June 23, 2008.

³⁵⁵ WikiLeaks. 'Troubled Tunisia: What should we do?', July 19, 2009.

concept about *values and rights* that emerged prerequisite to Ben Ali's *par l'habitude* familiar concept of *business as usual*.

In an ironic manner, both the post-Revolution historiography and Ben Ali (with his regime) considered as *deficient* the American sincere attention on Tunisia the period examined in this thesis. The historiography developed a perception about a presumed American *degraded* attention on Tunisia while it was in difficulty. In this false perception there were also people that even "had questioned the US government's contribution to human rights promotion in Tunisia" as it is stated in a Cable.³⁵⁶ On the other hand Ben Ali and his regime believed the American *close* view attention on Tunisia to be *occasional*, in the same period, 2003-2010.

Both, historiography and the Tunisian ruling elite ignored, or had not taken seriously, the qualitative deep changes of US policy in the post-September 11 World, interacting with a rapidly changing Arab world of rising Islamism and the threat of Islamist terrorism.

In this new conceptual model the corrupt and oppressing Ben Ali regime was an anomaly for the US foreign policy, demanding thus a *close view in situ* that was effectively implemented, as the Cables demonstrate.

By the end of the 2000s it was evident that only a drastic change of the situation in Tunisia could eventually free the country from Ben Ali's regime anomaly, allowing the US foreign policy to concentrate on its major problems in the context of the post-September 11 World.

³⁵⁶ WikiLeaks. 'Mohamed Abbou to Continue Activism for Freedom in Tunisia', August 3, 2007.

5. CONCLUSION

The subject of this thesis is the study of the US-Tunisia relations during the *third* period of post-Independence Tunisia (2000-2010), ten years before the Revolution, through the WikiLeaks Cables sent from Tunis US Embassy in that period.

These relations evolved in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and in the context of a rapidly changing Arab world of rising Islamism and the threat of Islamist terrorism.

The *in situ* US foreign policy in Tunisia is projected from the *close* view content of the used Cables in the frame of the corrupted and oppressing Ben Ali regime violating human rights and freedoms in conditions of a country in generalised crisis.

In this frame, the widespread view, as historiography presented in the post Revolution period lacks complete foundation. This view is based on the presumption that the US was not interested in, or reacted to, the depressing situation in Tunisia, seeming to *degrade* its active presence *vis-à-vis* the oppressive policies of the Tunisian regime.

The use of Wikileaks Cables shows the opposite: the US influenced *in situ* the dynamics of the US-Tunisia relations in the 2003-2010 period in defending democratisation, human rights and freedoms, together (of course) with their own short and long term interests in the country.

The Cables used in this study prove that the US was proactive in applying pressure on Ben Ali's regime in an almost continuous *tug of war* situation of bilateral relations.

The traditional *business as usual* concept of the previous periods (despite the insistence upon its validity also in the 2000-2010 period, according to international analysts) seems to have been set aside for a new *values and rights* concept. This principle appeared in US foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11, as it is evident in the meeting of US State secretary Powell with Ben Ali in 2003.

A turning point of the US foreign policy put in words by the next State secretary Rice in her 2005 speech in Cairo, customised for the MENA region states under oppressing governments.

As it is strongly reflected in the Cables, the US commitment for changes towards democratisation was a permanent issue for the Tunis US Embassy's *close* view and *in situ* actions in the years leading to the Revolution.

Partial conclusions, answering the research question, are given in the previous chapter, where are also answered questions asked in the Introduction of this thesis (see 1.3.2). Here, some additional conclusions confirm the thesis that the US stance in Tunisia was not at all *degraded* in the *third* period of post-Independence Tunisia (2000-2010), nor *supportive* to the Tunisian regime in that period.

Most surprising is the conclusion derived from the content of the Cables, that the Tunis US Embassy had not foreseen as yet of late 2010 the popular uprising as the result of the growing social unrest, especially after 2005. Instead, they were more focused on preparing for a succession scenario within the regime, preferably in a smooth transition to democratisation. This does not mean that the *in situ* US *close* view policy in Tunisia, in the period of our interest, had no impact in the uprising of late 2010-early 2011.

Summarizing, the conclusions that answer the research question of this thesis are synthesised as follows:

The US foreign policy in Tunisia, despite the widespread perception that it had *degraded* its presence in the country, was actively involved *in situ* in the period 2003-2010, demanding political reforms, defending human rights and freedoms and pressuring the Tunisian government to comply on relevant principles.

The widely diffused opinion that the US was only interested in doing *business as usual* and keeping a passive (if not *supportive*) stance with Ben Ali's regime, only for the sake of wider geostrategic plans, is invalid. Maybe this was the case in the previous *first* and *second* periods but not in the *third* (2000-2010). The Cables show a different image of the US-Tunisia relations, formed according to opposing agendas. On the other side, the Tunisian government tried to keep the *status quo* by counter-weighting the positive aspects of the traditional bilateral relations and the legacy of their past achievements against current internal oppression and corruption.

The Cables show that the American active concern for democratisation was impacting encouragement and perspective for Tunisian dissent. Especially this active concern was expressed to the weak political forces of the opposition and to the con- or pro-Tunisian government heads of the major social, professional and labour institutions. Almost all became sooner or later willing interlocutors of the US Embassy.

The same happened with former political personalities and prominent individual dissidents, all finding available the US reception and positive standing in the Tunisian government's discontent.

The contrasting attitude in the bilateral relations between the US and Tunisia was continuously developing serious friction in the period 2003-2010 mainly examined in this thesis with the use of Cables. This was burdening normality and cooperation in any other specific sectors of the relations, e.g. foreign affairs, defence and information exchange, culture and economy, all leading to mutual mistrust and communication difficulties.

From the analysis, it is finally shown that the content of the Cables, when properly selected, arranged and read are not just an amorphous set of information, but on the contrary allow the setting of organised primary sources that provide new knowledge in the context of scholar research.

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