

# A History of Modern Tunisia

(Excerpt covering the Ali Ibn Ghdahem rebellion of 1864  
retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?id=iRDz5FMIUEkC> )

Kenneth Perkins' book traces the history of Tunisia from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. After initially examining the years of French colonial rule from 1881 to 1956, when the Tunisians achieved independence, he describes the subsequent process of state-building, including the design of political and economic structures and the promotion of a social and cultural agenda. In conclusion, Perkins reviews the years since 1987, when a new regime came to power. Perkins' informed introduction is a necessity for those who study the region, and also for travellers who want more comprehensive information than most guidebooks offer. Kenneth Perkins is Professor of History at the University of South Carolina. He has worked extensively on North Africa and his research has taken him across the region. His publications include two editions of the Historical Dictionary of Tunisia (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997, 1989), Port Sudan: The Evolution of a Colonial City (Westview Press, 1993), Tunisia: Crossroads of the Islamic and European Worlds (Westview Press, 1986), and Qaids, Captains & Colons: French Military Administration in the Colonial Maghrib, 1844-1934 (Africana Pub, 1981).

## More details

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further antipathy towards Tunis. Again in this instance, the reform process, with the constitution at its apex, was perceived to lie at the heart of a distasteful situation. Roches blamed Khaznadar for sparking this unrest, and while he and his allies no doubt took advantage of the situation, many ordinary Tunisians had been adversely affected, in one way or another, by the course of events since 1857. It seems, therefore, reasonable to conclude that their actions flowed primarily from their perceptions of their self-interest.

The naiveté of Muhammad al-Sadiq's hope that his self-portrayal as an enlightened constitutional monarch would relax European pressures was hammered home by two events in 1863. His decision first to put his financial house in order by arranging a loan with Parisian bankers and then to offset France's augmented clout by granting special privileges to British subjects pushed a pervasive mood of agitation into open rebellion. To meet its international debt of some 30 million francs, the Tunisian government borrowed 35 million, although commissions and discounts reduced the amount actually at its disposal to 29 million. At 12 percent interest, the repayment totaled nearly 65 million francs, with yearly payments set at 7 million, or roughly half the state's average annual income.<sup>9</sup> The bey pledged the revenues generated by the personal tax, or *majba*, to meet this obligation, but made the imprudent decision to double its rate, lest it fail to bring in sufficient funds.

Muhammad al-Sadiq was also discovering that, despite the powers' advocacy of the constitution, members of the Maltese, Italian, and other European communities disliked its declaration of equality for all residents of Tunisia in so far as that concept resulted in the loss of certain of their privileges. Rather than submit to the jurisdiction of Tunisian tribunals, for example, they wanted to retain the consular courts, as well as to continue to enjoy exemptions from certain forms of taxation. Nevertheless, they asserted their entitlement to the protections guaranteed by the constitution. This highly selective interpretation angered Tunisians, further discrediting the reforms. Consequently, the bey looked favorably on the offer of a formal agreement placing British subjects, including the substantial Maltese population, on an equal footing with Tunisians under the umbrella of the constitution. To Muhammad al-Sadiq, the Anglo-Tunisian Convention terminated the extraterritorial status of a large and important foreign community; to the British, its provisions, which confirmed the right of property ownership granted by the constitution, sanctioned their endeavors in the country. Of great importance to both parties, the treaty counterbalanced French weight, which the recent loan had augmented.

To most of the bey's subjects, however, the accord merely represented yet another mechanism for foreigners to insinuate themselves into the country's affairs, almost certainly to the disadvantage of Tunisians.

Fear, anger, frustration, and disgust exploded into full-scale revolt in 1864. Observing the situation from Europe, where he had gone after his failed attempt to dissuade the bey and Khaznadar from borrowing money overseas had marginalized him in Tunis, Khair al-Din painted a grim picture of the situation.

The Arabs, no longer able to support the regime of despotism and injustice that was imposed upon them, rose up from one end of the Regency to the other; this formidable insurrection left the government on the brink of ruin. The Bey was in distress and unable to repress the revolt, waiting from day to day to see the insurgents invade the city and his residence.<sup>10</sup>

The uprising, instigated by 'Ali ibn Ghdahem, a *marabout* (pious figure, or local saint) and the son of a *qadi* (Muslim judge), originated among tribes in the region between Kairouan and Le Kef. The rebels demanded an end to the crushing taxes, a reversal of the reforms curtailing the prestige of local notables, especially in the judicial arena, and the abolition of the constitution. They laid the blame for all of these undesirable innovations at the doorstep of the palace, denouncing Muhammad al-Sadiq and his mamluks as the perpetrators of their misery. 'Ali's self-styled title of "bey of the people" brazenly manifested his contempt for a ruler who disregarded his subjects' welfare.

With its ranks decimated by the desertion of long-unpaid troops and no prospect of raising tribal levies, the army could not suppress the rebellion, which quickly spread to the Sahil, the rich plain along the eastern Mediterranean coast. The largely sedentary population of this region shared the tribesmen's grievances, but as producers of the cereals and olive oil that were Tunisia's most valuable exports, they grasped more clearly than the tribesmen the roles played by foreign diplomats, merchants, and speculators in what had been transpiring. Their more sophisticated assessment of the situation led them to the conclusion that Muhammad al-Sadiq no longer acted as a free agent and had lost the capacity to rectify matters even if he wished to do so. Rather than awaiting new policies from Tunis, many Sahilians hoped for the intervention of the Ottoman Empire, particularly as British and French warships, dispatched to protect the interests of their nationals, appeared on the horizon.

From the viewpoint of Istanbul the beylical regime appeared on the verge of going under, taking with it the Ottomans' frayed, but to them still

important, connections to Tunisia. Imperial officials harbored no illusions about the outcome of an attempt at intervention along the lines envisioned in the Sahil, but neither could they stand idly by. A senior Ottoman diplomat embarked for Tunis, carrying funds to revitalize the demoralized army and enable it to bring the uprising under control.<sup>11</sup> Even before the Ottomans stepped in, however, Khaznadar had begun to cripple the tribal rebellion by distributing bribes to its leaders, making promises of government employment, and manipulating local rivalries. When autumn plowing required the warriors' presence in their fields, the movement petered out. Ironically, it was in the Sahil, where the rebels had counted on Ottoman support, that the government deployed its Ottoman-financed reinforcements to cow them into submission.

A combination of force and persuasion crushed the uprising, but not before it had achieved a key objective, the revocation of the constitution. In this matter, however, the bey acted more in response to foreign than domestic pressures. The advantageous position Britain had secured by means of the Anglo-Tunisian Convention, in no small part as a result of Prime Minister Khaznadar's close ties to the British consulate, greatly disturbed France. At least by this gauge, the reform movement had gone awry, strengthening its main competitor for influence in Tunisia. French officials linked the constitution and the convention, as General Jean-Baptiste Campenon, the chief of the military mission during the rebellion, made clear: "The English convention is the consequence of the Tunisian constitution; let the constitution become a dead letter, let it fall . . . and it will carry in its wake the English treaty."<sup>12</sup> Towards that end, but under the pretext of ending rampant injustices, France called for Khaznadar's ouster, encouraged the rebels, and demanded that the bey suspend the constitution. As in the past, the credible inference that the French would resort to military means to have their way impelled Muhammad al-Sadiq to accommodate them and dismantle the constitutional system they had so recently insisted he impose. As Campenon had predicted, without the safeguards of the constitution, the Anglo-Tunisian Convention withered. In short order, the status quo ante, with its virulent competition among Europeans and the absence of constraints on Tunisian officials, had returned. On the other hand, the end of the revolt brought about a change, at least on paper, in Tunisia's relationship with the Ottoman Empire. At the bey's request, Khair al-Din reached an understanding with the sultan by which his sovereignty was acknowledged in return for his recognition of hereditary Husainid rule and Tunisia's administrative autonomy. Bearing in mind the events that had