

# TUNISIA

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## IV

GOVERNMENT. – ADMINISTRATION. – ARMY  
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There are twenty fortified places in Tunisia; but it is far from the case that the fortifications of these twenty points are worthy of the attention of European strategists. In many cases, it is simply a fort with walls of stone or masonry, fine for resistance during the uprisings of the surrounding tribes, when the artillery with which they are armed is composed of old iron guns, without mountings. Certain forts in the northern parts of the country, especially around Tunis, would present themselves, it is true, in better condition. Let us begin with the fortified positions located along the coast and on the islands, starting from the border of Algeria: [34]

**Bordj Djedid**, 36 kilometers north-west of Bâdja [Béja], opposite Tabarqa [Tabarka]; the island of **Tabarqa**, where we have demolished the fortifications; **Benzert** [Bizerte], with a citadel, and an isolated fort; **Goulette** (Halg El-Ouâd), with a fort and batteries; **Ghâr El-Melh** (Oporto-Farina), with two forts; **Tunis**, with enclosing walls and a citadel; **Hammâmet**, with a walled enclosure and a citadel; **Soûsa**, with a walled enclosure, a separate citadel and a fort, armed with eighty-five guns; **Monastîr**, with two walled enclosures, a citadel and two forts, armed with sixty-eight guns; **Mahdiya**, with an enclosure in ruins and a well maintained citadel; **Sefâqès** [Sfax], with a crenelated wall flanked with towers, a citadel, a fort and ten guns; **Djezîret El- Charqi**, group of the Qerqena islands, with a castle and two towers; **Gâbès**, with a fort, and a post on the river; the island of **Jerba**, with eight forts; **Zarzîs**, with a small fort, El-Bibân, and a post.

Fortified places in the interior are restricted in number compared to the maritime places; **Mâter** [Mateur], a walled city, to the north of [35] the Medjerda; **Bâdja**, to the north of the Medjerda, an enclosure flanked with towers, and a citadel with four guns in times of peace; **El-Kâf** [El Kef], to the south of the Medjerda, a fortified enclosure, a citadel and a separate fort; **Bordj El-' Arbi**, a fort on the territory in the tribe of Mâdjer, not far from the ruins of Sebeïtla (the old Sufetula); **Teboursouq**, a city walled to the south of the Medjerda, almost directly south of Bâdja; the holy city of **Qaïrouân**, to the south of Tunis, with a crenellated enclosure four kilometers around and several batteries; **Gafça** [Gafsa], in the Djerîd, with an old citadel; **El-Hamma Matmâta**, a small fort to the west of Gâbès; and finally **Bordj Nefzâwa**, a simple command post, to the south of the Chott El-Djerîd.

## VII

### GEOGRAPHICAL AND STATISTICAL OUTLINE (CONTINUATION): THE EASTERN PART OF THE TUNISIAN TELL

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Continuing along the coast one enters the *outan* [Governorate] of Sefâqès [Sfax], populated by 24,000 inhabitants, among whom 9,000 are nomads, forming several tribes including that of the 'Aqâreba [Agareb] marabouts, descendants of the marabout Sidi El-'Aqâreb. The land in this district is perhaps less fertile than that of the preceding ones, but the work of the Sefâqsiqa (this is how one designates the inhabitants) have for a large part remediated the inferiority of the ground. [81]

The town of Sefâqès, one of the most important in Tunisia, is also one of those which is least marked by decline. It is divided into two centers, each defended by a stone wall. The upper city, inhabited by the Moslems, has a crenellated defensive wall, flanked with round or square towers. This enclosure has two gates, of which one opens to the south, onto the lower city, and the other gives access to the countryside, on the north. The qaçba (Kasbah), well built in the style of a strong castle with towers from the Middle Ages, is tiled; its state of maintenance leaves something to be desired. It is armed with old but still good guns. The population of the Moslem city is as high as 7,000 or 10,000 people (1).

This town is characterized by its industry and its activity, and perhaps also by a fanaticism more accentuated than one observes amongst the inhabitants of the other cities in Tunisia, and it would be interesting to

p.81 (1) Out of date official Tunisian information. The correspondent of journal La France during the campaign of 1881 in Tunisia gave a figure of 25,000 with 1,500 Europeans. If these latest figures are precise it would be necessary to modify also the figure for the population of the *Outan* ("province").

discover whether this fanaticism depends on a schism or a Moslem fraternity [82] which the Sefaqsîya have preferred. In costume and character they form a completely separate people compared with elsewhere in Tunisia. Five mosques, three colleges, several zaouiya or Moslem cells and, quite a rare thing in these regions, a hospital founded on the initiative of the inhabitants, are built in the upper city and meet the spiritual and temporal needs of the small community.

One descends by a gentle slope from the Moslem city to the Jewish and Frankish [European] city [*Ville Franque*] which, defended by a less solid wall, is built in a low and marshy place. There are 800 Christians there, being Maltese, Italians and French, and 1,200 Jews, who have a synagogue. The lower city has three doors and, like the upper city, it consumes only rainwater. Many cisterns, of which the largest, called El-Naçrîya (*Nasria*), is a kind of central tank, prevent the shortage of water.

A belt of gardens, least 7 kilometers wide, surrounds Sefâqès; and beyond this a sandy and uncultivated zone extends. In each garden one sees a square tower, which makes it possible for the owner to defend his harvests of olives, [83] pistachios, figs, almonds and dates, in case of attacks by the marauding nomads.

Sefâqès has a bazaar more beautiful than those of the capital, which is divided into several markets Soûq El-' Attârîn (perfume market), Soûq El-Belrhadjia (shoe market), Soûq El-Haddâdin ironwork, [*Fondouk Forgerons*"]) etc, which is a place of important business. On one hand the products they export from their orchards include olive oil, olives, figs, raisins, pistachios, cumin, almonds, etc, and especially sponges which the sailors fish on the coast, and dried fish; on the other hand, they import and re-export wools and leathers from the wandering tribes, dates and the fine woolen fabrics from the Djerîd, but a Draconian tax measure, applied twelve or fifteen years ago by the Tunisian government, killed the trade. The sale of dates was struck by a tax of 166 per 100 and that of wool by a tax of 100 per 100 ad valorem.

Sefâqès has a secure harbor, but not very deep, so all but the smaller ships must anchor in the open sea. Two batteries defend this harbor, where the tide is very perceptible. If it was necessary to summarize in a sentence the impression [84] left by reports from travelers to Sefâqès, we would not hesitate to say that, thanks to the quality of its inhabitants, this center has a future.

Apart from the chief town there is only one borough which deserves mention, the maritime borough of Mahrez [Mahares], 39 kilometers from Sefâqès. Mahrez has 700 inhabitants primarily occupied in the work of basket making.

Three large Arab tribes, each one having a qâid [Caïd] and a special administration, live around the territory of Sefâqès: they are the Methâlith, the Nefâth and the Mehâdeba. The Oulâd 'Amer, that perhaps should be included in one of these groups, show excellent dispositions towards the French nation.

The Methâlith, a very numerous Arab tribe, because it counts 15,000 to 20,000 people, but which is not characterized by military qualities, occupy the country to the north of Sefâqès as far as the surroundings of El-Djem. It is subdivided into six groups: the Oulâd Merâh, Oulâd Merâya, Oulâd Said, Oulâd Balâta, Oulâd Naçer and Oulâd Nadjem.

The Nefâth, another Arab tribe of 4,000 to [85] 8,000 people, camps in the valleys of the Ouâd Draham ('*Wadi Draham*'), Ouâd Souïniya and Ouâd Tarfâwi, and close to Henchîr Sa'ida, that is to say to the north and the south-west of Sefâqès.

Finally the Mehâdeba, peaceful descendants of a famous marabout, called Sidi El-Mahedeb, live even further to the south-west, close to 'Ain El-Kelb. Their migrations bring them to the territory of Gâbès. They would comprise 6,600 people approximately.

To the east, the Qerqena islands (or Qarqenna [*“Kerkennah”*]), separated from the continent by a broad and quite shallow strait, form a province of the *outan* of Sefâqès, managed by a khalifa. Their very fertile ground produces dates of lower quality and grains, while the sea which surrounds them nourishes edible sponges and octopus, which are the object of a lucrative fishing industry. They have a population of from 6,000 to 7,000 inhabitants (the official document of 1868 gives as many as 10,000 people), who share their work between agriculture, fishing, which is very abundant, and the construction of felouques [*“Feluccas”*]. The smallest of the two islands, known as Djezîret El-Gharbî, because it is to the west, has one [86] only village, Mellîta; the largest and furthest away from the continent, called Djeziret El-Charqî, has nine villages, which are Charqî, El-'Ataya, 'Abbâs, Kellebîn, Oulâd Bou-Ali, Oulâd Yânek, Oulâd Qasem, Ramla and another Mellîta, without counting a castle, formerly intended to defend the Island.

Duveyrier, Henri (1840-1892). Tunisia. 1881.