

Postcolonial Tunisian Networks of Dignity in 1968 and the Arab Spring

BURLEIGH HENDRICKSON

The post-World War Two disintegration of the French empire indeed constituted a period of rapid change. Beginning in the interwar era, anti-colonialists from Southeast Asia and the Caribbean to North and West Africa and beyond often crossed paths in Paris, exchanged ideas, and sustained each other's causes. While these interactions helped to catalyze resistance and drive change, the period of decolonization that followed provided exciting opportunities for engagement, creating new spaces, organizations, and networks of collaboration and exchange. At the same time, decolonization could also usher in new regimes of oppression that sought to quash dissent and unify around a particular political party or agenda. For example, Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba dissolved the Tunisian Communist Party in 1962, sending left-wing radicals underground and spawning new organizations often launched in Paris. In the aftermath of free speech demonstrations at the University of Tunis in 1968, these clandestine groups became important in advocating for the human rights of detained activists. Similarly, while the massive protests denouncing corruption in Tunisia in 2010-11 were undeniably led by Tunisians at the national level, they also drew global attention and inspired novel solidarities, including those emanating from France.

This article compares the Tunisian activism that emerged in 1968 and the Arab Spring. Its primary goal is to understand in each case activists' multiple references to dignity. In different ways, both sets of activists fought for Tunisian human dignity in the face of authoritarianism and brought international attention to their causes. Second, I compare the dynamics of postcolonial activist networks to understand international solidarities during two important historical moments of acute Tunisian anti-authoritarian resistance. In each instance, Tunisians across the Mediterranean, in France and the homeland, demanded that their dignity as citizens be recognized. These transnational connections are important to highlight against notions of the "end of postcolonialism," as some have argued was evidenced during the Arab Spring.¹ Instead, I found that while Franco-Tunisian anti-authoritarian networks were perhaps more active in 1968 (despite not resulting in regime change), they continued to be relevant in the face of threats to Tunisian dignity at the close of the dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Particular historical violations of the dignity of others demand moral collective action for victims of human rights

¹ For example, Hamid Dabashi has argued that the "epistemic condition of the state of coloniality has finally exhausted itself." See Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London, New York: Zed Books, 2012), 10.

abuses and, in the case of Tunisia, postcolonial relations continue to bear on the nature of activism.

Before the notable mass student protests of France's *Mai 68*, Tunisians held their own series of equally important strikes at the University of Tunis. In June 1967, a group of Tunisian students organized a protest against President Habib Bourguiba's failure to denounce the West's pro-Israel stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and student leader Mohamed Ben Jenet was scapegoated with twenty years of forced labor. His harsh sentencing set off a wave of unrest at university campuses, to which the state responded with even stronger levels of suppression, followed by new demands for increased human rights. The heightened youth activism and state brutality surrounding 1968 is particularly important to recall in the wake of recent hagiographic recollections of Bourguiba when compared to the ousted Ben Ali. For example, prior to current Tunisian President Kais Saïed's consolidation of power through the dissolution of parliament and the judiciary, Bertrand Le Genre's biography claims that without Bourguiba's bold leadership, "Tunisia would not be what it is at the start of 2019, the only democracy in the Arab world."² And in June 2022, the Academy Beït El Hikma and the Association of Bourguibian Studies jointly organized a series of conferences and activities commemorating the historical memory of Bourguiba's social reforms, spearheaded by academic-politicians such as Mahmoud Ben Romdhane.³ These revisionist histories tend to gloss over Bourguiba's own version of authoritarianism that was felt acutely by Tunisian students and political dissidents in the 1960s and 1970s. Efforts to overcome the recent history of Ben Ali's shamefully corrupt dictatorship must not revert to attempts to recover a mythical patriotic past. This would do a disservice to the brave activists who formed networks of human dignity as early as the 1960s.

Scholars, including myself, have devoted recent attention to human rights causes in Tunisia's independence era.⁴ While these contributions have shed light on an important case of postcolonial (anti-)authoritarianism, this has often been to the detriment of analyses of *human dignity* (which accompanied human rights). Even in the field of philosophy, Remy Debes has noted that "given the weight the concept bears in western value systems today as the implicit or explicit grounds for egalitarianism and theories of human rights . . . the paucity of research into dignity is odd."⁵ Returning to one of the framers of our modern understanding of dignity, Immanuel Kant, can help us to connect claims for human dignity in Tunisia in both 1968 and

² Bertrand Le Genre, *Bourguiba* (Paris: Fayard, 2019), 4.

³ Alya Hamza, "Journées d'études bourguibiennes: Bourguiba, le réformateur," *La Presse de Tunisie* (26 May 2022). Accessed 22 February 2023, <https://lapresse.tn/131450/journees-detudes-bourguibiennes-bourguiba-le-reformateur/>.

⁴ See Melek Saral, "The Protection of Human Rights in Transitional Tunisia: Capacity, Willingness and Capacity-Building," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 16, no. 1 (2019): 1-26; Idriss Jebari, "'Illegitimate Children': The Tunisian New Left and the Student Question, 1963-1975," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (2022): 100-123; and Burleigh Hendrickson, "March 1968: Practicing Transnational Activism from Tunis to Paris," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 1 (2012): 755-774.

⁵ Remy Debes, *Dignity: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

2011. As Kant theorized in his 1785 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morality*, “everything has either a *price* or a *dignity* . . . what [is] raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity.”⁶ Realized human dignity cannot be replaced or exchanged with a fungible equivalent; it has an incomparable, priceless worth, and is reserved for humankind above other life forms. Kant further emphasized the relationship between autonomy and dignity, in which “Autonomy is therefore the ground of the dignity of human nature . . .”⁷ What distinguishes mankind from the rest of nature, then, is its potential to lead a dignified life, its duty to respect the self, and the autonomy to demand the respect of others. It is not that one’s dignity cannot be violated, as was clearly the case for Tunisians censored and tortured under Bourguiba and then Ben Ali. As the contemporary philosopher Stephen Darwall puts it, human dignity entails “the authority to hold accountable,” or “to make a demand or a claim,” which is exactly what Tunisian activists did in 1968 and 2011 when they demanded self-respect and recognition from abusive governments.⁸

The Bourguiba regime’s use of torture against Tunisians shifted activist claims away from general anti-imperialism and toward human rights. By the 1970s, these transformed into demands that their human dignity be recognized with the emergence of associations devoted to improving prison conditions and the everyday lives of postcolonial immigrant workers in France. These new preoccupations centered initially around human dignity on an individual level (respect for one’s self-worth), as we shall see in the case of Ahmed Ben Othmani after his arrest in 1968. In order to overcome severe physical and emotional abuse, he leaned on his own human dignity. Upon his release, however, he spent the rest of his life advocating for the dignity of others across the globe, particularly political prisoners.

How then does Kantian human dignity, which demands recognition and respect of self and others, relate to postcolonial activist networks? As I see it, the transnational campaigns of solidarity that followed the state’s repressive measures in 1968 and 2011 suggest a collective desire to protect those whose dignity the regimes had violated. Comparative study across time reveals that while dignity was a key ingredient in postcolonial Tunisian activism, claims for dignity were neither stagnant nor essential throughout independent Tunisia’s history. In 1968, dignity commonly referred to basic human rights or maintaining bodily integrity in the face of torture, whereas in 2011 protestors proclaimed the dignity of work from the outset, denouncing egregious government corruption as an affront to Tunisian dignity writ large. Both movements shared, however, similar references to dignity regarding the right to free assembly and due process. Though the historical context of activism may have differed significantly between 1968 and the Arab Spring—where the former witnessed limited realization of demands—postcolonial networks of solidarity were central to both anti-authoritarian quests for human dignity. In short, transnational solidarity in these cases demonstrates the recognition of others that corrupt regimes

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morality*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 42.

⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, 43.

⁸ Stephen Darwall, “Kant on Respect, Dignity, and the Duty of Respect,” in *Kant’s Ethics of Virtue*, ed. Monika Betzler (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 192.

deny. It is evidence that despite dark colonial pasts and the presence of postcolonial authoritarianism, Tunisian movements for human dignity are about individual self-respect *and* the collective recognition of others.

Transnational Networks of Dignity in the 1960s and 1970s

Tunisian students in 1968 articulated an alternative vision for the nation outside of Bourguiba's centralized one-party state and pro-Western stance. While not immediately successful, Tunisia's student movements of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to important transnational human rights activism that targeted injustices committed by the Bourguiba regime. They commanded the attention of the international community and ushered in the first human rights organization based in Tunisia in 1976 (officially recognized in 1977) and the first Amnesty International section in North Africa in 1981. Their roots lie in Bouguiba's dissolution of the Tunisian Communist Party and seizure of its journal in the early 1960s. In response, a Paris-based organization of Tunisian intellectuals formed to comment on national issues such as agricultural reform, the tourism industry, and Tunisian foreign policy. They initially centered their activity on the underground publication, *Perspectives tunisiennes*, and members were soon identified by the journal's shorthand name, "Perspectives."⁹

Though initially focused on publishing critical thought-pieces, Perspectives took to the streets in June 1967 during the Arab-Israeli war when it gathered hundreds of protesters outside the British and American embassies in Tunis. They drew large crowds from neighboring areas of the city, which ended in vandalism. The regime responded with a heavy hand, ultimately scapegoating theology student and Perspectives' member Mohamed Ben Jennet for the damaged property.¹⁰ After sentencing Ben Jennet to twenty years of hard labor in March 1968, students led a series of indignant university-wide strikes that forced the regime to close the campus in Tunis. According to scholar Nader Hashemi, "The theme of dignity, or its converse, indignity, and its relationship to modern Arab politics is a multidimensional phenomenon. It exists both at the level of the individual and the collective."¹¹ For Hashemi, when another individual's suffering is recognized and identified with on a personal level, it can generate a particular form of collective indignation in the shared historical context of the modern Arab world. In a more general sense,

⁹ Sophie Bessis, "'Perspectives': l'effervescence tunisienne des années 1960," in *1968: Une histoire collective*, ed. Philippe Artières and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 120-124.

¹⁰ Ben Jennet was a theology student at Zitouna University at the time of his arrest. According to Sophie Bessis, it is unlikely that Ben Jennet or other Perspectives members advocated violence. Some former members claimed that vandalism was conducted by militia forces under the direction of the regime itself to create a pretext for repressing oppositional groups. See Bessis, "'Perspectives,'" 122; and Simone Lellouche Othmani, interview with author, Paris, 22 September 2010. For an overview of Tunisian radical left politics during this period, see also Abd al-Jalil Buqura, *Harakat Afaq min Tarikh al-Yasar al-Tunisi* (Tunis: CERES, 1993).

¹¹ Nader Hashemi, "The Arab Spring Two Years On: Reflections on Dignity, Democracy, and Devotion," *Ethics & International Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2013): 209.

as the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza would define it, indignation “is hatred toward someone who has injured another.”¹² Protestors’ collective action against Mohamed Ben Jenet’s unjust sentencing led allies to criticize the Bourguiba regime for its failure to recognize free speech and its arbitrary use of force. By September 1968, Bourguiba had created an unconstitutional Special Court to try over 134 detainees in relation to the March events, resulting in the conviction of over eighty protesters for crimes against the state.¹³

Political prisoners reported brutal conditions including torture sessions, inadequate clothing during cold winter months, sleeping on dirt floors, and malnourishment. Activists noted that the most reprehensible and inhumane repression manifested during interrogations following police roundups. “In fact, the conduct of the investigation on the premises of security testifies to the systematic use of torture and the total disregard for human dignity.”¹⁴ Known student leftist figures such as Abdellaziz Krichen, Hedi Zartour, and Ammar Jellouli—along with Tunisian and French faculty suspected of sympathizing with student protestors—were arrested at the University of Tunis, brought to Bourguiba’s Socialist Destourian Party headquarters, and tortured. Among the detained was Perspectivist Ahmed Ben Othmani, who had studied in Paris in the 1960s and established relationships with French faculty who advocated on his behalf.¹⁵ Despite Othmani’s connections and close relationship with prominent intellectuals, he nonetheless received a sixteen-year prison sentence, while his partner and future wife, Simone Lellouche, was exiled to France in April 1968. While in exile, Lellouche began coordinating with other Tunisian expatriates and French allies for the release of those convicted in the September trials. In the immediate term, the Bourguiba administration’s severe reaction temporarily handcuffed the dissident youth leadership and struck fear into future would-be student activists. In the longer term, it ignited a dynamic transnational human rights campaign that Tunisian activists organized from Paris.¹⁶

After Ahmed Othmani experienced the horrors of the Tunisian prison system, he shifted his efforts away from anti-imperial activism to penal reform, human rights and, above all else, human dignity. Having had his eyelids and genitals burned with cigarettes, all of his orifices penetrated with sticks and hoses, and his body urinated on, he proclaimed it was “the sense of my own human dignity, at once physical and moral, [that] gave me the strength to resist and put

¹² Cited in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009), 241.

¹³ See Dhifallah, “Bourguiba et les étudiants,” 321.

¹⁴ Anonymous, “Texte 1: Texte original (sauf introduction et conclusion et dont il manque une page), écrit juin-juillet 68,” 3, in Fonds Othmani, SOL 36, La Contemporaine, Nanterre.

¹⁵ These included figures such as French *coopérant* Raymond Beltran and the famous intellectual Michel Foucault, who once harbored Othmani at his residence in Sidi Bou Saïd in Tunisia. See Raymond Beltran, interview with the author, Carcassonne, 7 December 2010; and Ahmed Othmani with Sophie Bessis, *Beyond Prison: The Fight to Reform Prison Systems around the World*, trans. Marguerite Garling (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 8.

¹⁶ I treat the transnational connections between Tunis and Paris at length in *Decolonizing 1968: Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022), chapters 2 and 5.

aside pain and suffering at the hardest points . . . What is important is the protection of people's dignity by all means possible."¹⁷ Lived experience placed dignity at the forefront of activist goals. Othmani initially leaned on his own sense of human dignity to overcome gruesome physical and mental abuse, and found strength in refusing to speak to his torturers. A number of other detainees understandably succumbed under duress, ultimately pledging allegiance to the regime or naming other members of activist circles. However, Othmani's personal dignity, in the Kantian sense, was "raised above all price," as it could not be exchanged.¹⁸ He realized his potential dignity by refusing to submit to the regime or to trade his political values in return for personal safety. Not only did he advocate for the dignity of others facing a similar plight, he even expressed empathy for the perpetrators of violence who were cogs in the machine. He recalled that a police guard "embraced me with tears running down his face, having just seen his colleague urinate on me in a fit of rage because he couldn't get me to speak . . . I kept in touch with some of them later on."¹⁹ For Othmani, dignity operated then on a number of levels from the individual to collective solidarity, and even to a universal human dignity broad enough to include violent perpetrators. After spending most of the 1970s in captivity, Othmani would later make it his life's work to reform the prison system worldwide.

The University of Tunis erupted again in February 1972 shortly after authorities expelled science student Férid Ben Chehida and arrested Simone Lellouche Othmani upon her return from exile. She was put on trial and received a suspended sentence of two years. This proved to be the last straw for students and massive protests demanding the release of Simone and Ahmend Othmani led to what she would later describe as "the first democratic movement in Tunisia on a national level."²⁰ Over 4,000 students at various colleges at the University of Tunis went on strike to express solidarity with Ben Chehida and the Othmanis. At the same time, Franco-Tunisian networks began to advocate for the dignity of detained activists. Tunisians living in France launched the Committee for the Liberation of Ahmed Ben Othmani, and across the Mediterranean students called for his release. Members worked closely with Paris-based Tunisian student groups to organize a hunger strike at their student residence hall in Paris in December 1972. They also helped to establish Amnesty's adoption of a number of prisoners, making efforts to coordinate their legal teams and providing care packages and regular communication with the outside world. Other organizations based in Paris reported on events in both Tunisia and France, spreading news to the activist community regarding the forced military service of Tunisian student activists, and the expulsion of Tunisian immigrant workers by the Tunisian Consulate in France.²¹

¹⁷ Othmani with Bessis, *Beyond Prison*, 12, 91.

¹⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 42. On pledging allegiance to the regime to avoid torture, see "Jamel," interview with author, Tunis, 19 April 2011.

¹⁹ Othmani with Bessis, *Beyond Prison*, 13.

²⁰ Letter from Simone Lellouche Othmani to M. Claude Jullien of *Monde Diplomatique*, dated Paris 3 December 1977, in Fonds Othmani, SOL 29; *La Contemporaine*, Nanterre.

²¹ "Communiqué de Novembre 1973," undated, in Fonds Othmani, SOL 29; *La Contemporaine*, Nanterre.

Concern for the plight of Tunisian workers was emphasized further by efforts in the early 1970s to collaborate with the France-based Arab Workers' Movement.²² This group had evolved out of its previous iteration, the Palestine Committees, made up of pan-Arab nationalists and French Maoist allies. The Arab Workers' Movement gradually began to include in its calls for Palestinian liberation a new emphasis on improving the daily lives of immigrant workers. Founding Tunisian member Saïd Bouziri recalled that he was "revolted by their living conditions in basements," and "horrible stories" like "our African brothers dying of asphyxiation" from indoor fires where heat had been cut off in immigrant worker housing units.²³ The Arab Workers' Movement described its new emphasis as "a movement in the struggle for dignity, against racism . . . for decent living conditions and the defense of our rights, against moral and material misery."²⁴ Bouziri initially went on a hunger strike in 1972 to protest his own threatened deportation due to his activism. Like Othmani, he transformed these individual efforts to retain his personal dignity into broader collective action.

Bouziri recalled "wanting to scream" at injustices faced by immigrants in France; he helped organize successful hunger strikes in places like the Goutte d'Or and inspired others in Valence to support workers facing deportation.²⁵ Beyond imminent expulsions and deplorable housing conditions, workers cited frequent harassment from local police, employers who withheld pay and social security paperwork, and refusal to provide workman's compensation following work-related injuries. Mounting public pressure from French sympathizers ultimately led Minister of State Edgar Faure to lift expulsion orders, along with a promise on Christmas Day 1972 to provide legal work permits to the Valence hunger strikers.²⁶ Like Perspectives in the late 1960s, actions that began with anti-imperial politics in support of Palestinian liberation were transformed based on lived experience. Given the Tunisians' different conditions at home versus abroad, Bouziri's group endeavored to improve everyday life for foreign workers residing in France, whereas Perspectives focused on human rights at the national level. And though their

²² See "Tunisie: une université en grève et . . . un ministre raciste," *Politique-Hebdo* 15 (10 February 1972). On the MTA, see Rabah Assaoui, *Immigration and National Identity: North African Political Movements in Colonial and Postcolonial France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 153-217 and "Le Discours du Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA) aux années 1970 en France: Mobilisation et mémoire du combat anticolonial," in *Hommes et Migration* 1263 (Oct.-Nov., 2006), 105-119.

²³ Saïd Bouziri, interview with Bernard Lehembre, Paris, 20 November 1999. Produced by agence IM'média and accessed online 27 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Z2cM0wBsp8>. For more on the Palestine Committees and Bouziri, see Abdellali Hajjat, "Les comités Palestine (1970-1972): Aux origines du soutien de la cause palestinienne en France," *Revue d'études palestiniennes* 98 (2006): 1-27; and Daniel Gordon, *Immigrants & Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-racism in France* (Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 2012).

²⁴ "Les Lutttes des Travailleurs Arabes en France Depuis 70: La Formation du MTA," undated tract, in Fonds de la Gauche Prolétarienne sur le MTA, F delta res 576 5/9/2, La Contemporaine, Nanterre.

²⁵ Bouziri, interview with Lehembre.

²⁶ French journalist Michel Duyrat documented early 1970s hunger strikes in a series of interviews he conducted with North African immigrant workers for *La cause du peuple*. See Fonds Duyrat (1 1/4), côte F delta rés 708/2, La Contemporaine, Nanterre.

claims used slightly different language than Arab Spring activists demanding the right to work, they shared common cause with society's most vulnerable, whether immigrants in France or Tunisia's itinerant and underemployed who resembled Mohamed Bouazizi.

While the immediate gains of the 1968 and 1972 activism were relatively modest, they succeeded in developing robust Franco-Tunisian human and immigrant rights campaigns. These drew international attention to attacks on the human dignity of Tunisian citizens both at home and abroad. Following the heavy-handed verdicts in the September 1968 trials, the Committee to liberate Ben Jennet morphed into an expansive International Committee for the Protection of Human Rights, comprised of Tunisians living in France and French sympathizers who advocated for incarcerated Tunisian activists. They undertook a series of efforts to alert the international public to the situation in Tunis, advocated for the rights of prisoners, and assisted in providing legal support. When reports of torture surfaced, they reached out to French media outlets to put international pressure on the Bourguiba regime regarding prisoners' rights.²⁷ Though their efforts to obtain goals such as due legal process and protection of immigrants' rights saw limited success, their activism speaks to the importance of postcolonial networks in the decades following Tunisia's national independence and concerns with repression occurring on both sides of the Mediterranean. Likewise, claims for human dignity often started at the individual level before being transformed to the collective as evidenced by Othmani (prison reform) and Bouziri (immigrants' rights), where they took up universal causes and, in turn, activist groups worked in solidarity on their individual behalf. In Kantian terms, these cases show how activists held their oppressors accountable, and demanded respect and dignity for both themselves and others.

Mohamed Bouazizi and the Revolution of Freedom and Dignity

The self-immolation of 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi from Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010, set off waves of Tunisian protest calling for the removal of dictator- President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Bouazizi would die just a few weeks later at the Ben Arous Burn and Trauma Center in Tunis while receiving treatment for severe burns. Though the details explaining Bouazizi's breaking point remain somewhat murky, it is clear that he faced regular harassment from local police who sought bribes to allow him to sell produce without a permit. When interviewed by an *Al Jazeera* reporter, Bouazizi's cousin reported that his self-immolation occurred immediately after he was refused a consultation with the governor at the provincial office of Sidi Bouzid, where he planned to complain that his produce scales had been confiscated by police. According to his cousin, who recorded the frenzied aftermath at the steps of the government building, Bouazizi had told him in the days leading up to his desperate act, "I'm so

²⁷ The media campaign led to collaboration with the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights, which wrote a letter to Bourguiba in September 1968 denouncing the torture of prisoners. "Lettre ouverte de la Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme au Président Bourguiba," signed and dated by General Secretary Suzanne Collette-Kahn, Paris, 13 September 1968, published in *Tribune Progressiste* 5 (December 1968).

tired. I can't breathe anymore."²⁸ Other relatives claimed that he faced daily humiliations from authorities, and it was rumored he had been physically assaulted by a female officer. In a fictionalized account based on extensive research, Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun writes: "his dignity has been crushed beneath police boots. He tells himself, 'It's crazy how the poor are mean to each other, to those who are even poorer.'"²⁹

Like the victims of human rights abuses Mohamed Ben Jennet and Ahmed Ben Othmani in 1968, Bouazizi's case was a response to an attack on individual human dignity that turned to collective indignation. While analysts and scholars later struggled to understand what united the disparate groups—from blue collar workers and soldiers to lawyers—who rose up to denounce Bouazizi's experiences of humiliation, North Africa scholar Michael Willis claimed that "There was one common theme . . . when those who participated in the revolution spoke about their reasons for doing so: the quest for dignity, or *karama* in Arabic."³⁰ Nader Hashemi similarly explains that "Arabs across North Africa and the Middle East immediately identified with Bouazizi's story on a personal level. His economic plight was theirs . . . 'Arab indignity' also exists on a collective level, and it is associated with a set of common historical experiences."³¹ These sentiments were echoed in Tunisian testimonials from the 2011 Revolution. For example, a 26-year-old student and internet activist from Mourouj (just south of Tunis), Marwa Hermassi, said of Bouazizi, "I understood him; I could imagine his situation."³² Likewise, 25-year-old teacher Yesmina Khedir from Tunis was adamant that when Tunisians collectively took to the streets after Bouazizi's self-immolation, "their single demand was 'dignity.'"³³

Tunisian appeals for dignity spread to large cities in the North, sending shock waves throughout the Arab world when the nation ended Ben Ali's 23-year reign on 14 January 2011, after a month of intense civil disobedience. Though some in the Western media controversially termed it the "Jasmine Revolution," for its relatively non-violent character, and others coined the "Facebook Revolution," for its reliance on social media, many Tunisians prefer the more appropriate designation as a "Revolution of Freedom and Dignity."³⁴ As Mohamed-Salah Omri has shown, Tunisians rejected the coupling of their nation's revolutionary activity in terms

²⁸ Thessa Lageman, "Remembering Mohamed Bouazizi: The Man Who Sparked the Arab Spring," *Al Jazeera* (17 December 2020). Accessed 23 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/17/remembering-mohamed-bouazizi-his-death-triggered-the-arab>.

²⁹ Tahar Ben Jelloun, *By Fire: Writings on the Arab Spring*, trans. by Rita S. Nezami (Evanston, Ill.: Curbstone Books/Northwestern University Press, 2016), 17.

³⁰ Michael J. Willis, "Revolt for Dignity: Tunisia's Revolution and Civil Resistance," in *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters*, edited by Adam Roberts, Michael J. Willis, Rory McCarthy, and Timothy Garton Ash (Oxford University Press, 2015), 49.

³¹ Hashemi, "The Arab Spring," 209.

³² Marwa Hermassi, "Torments of the Revolution," in *Voices of the Arab Spring: Personal Stories from the Arab Revolutions*, ed. by Asaad Alsaleh (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 39.

³³ Yesmina Khedir, "Tunisia's Hard Times and Its Best Times," in *Voices of the Arab Spring*, 42.

³⁴ For example, see generally Mohamed-Salah Omri, "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry," *boundary 2* 39, no. 1 (2012): 137-165; Alsaleh, *Voices of the Arab Spring*; and Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, no. 1 (2012): 18-45.

associated with its welcoming mass tourism industry (i.e., soft sun and beaches open for business).³⁵ Indeed, the singer Hedi Jouini's reference to the smell of "roses and jasmine" in his homeland were converted during the resistance movement to the smell of "tear gas and gunpowder," which "burns the eye" rather than "pleases it."³⁶ Omri notes that during the revolutionary fervor, the old inviting slogan, "Smile, you are in Tunisia," was transformed into a "local imaging of dignity," when revolutionary Tunisians sprayed, "Raise your head up, you are in Kasserine," in black paint in the city square.³⁷ A raucous demand for the recognition of the dignity of ordinary Tunisians was clearly a key element of this wave of anti-authoritarian activity. Bouazizi's refusal to accept the conditions of his existence inspired Tunisians to peel back tired slogans of Tunisia as a happy tourist destination that masked a much starker reality, and replace them with affirmations of self-worth.

Beyond the repurposed poems and song lyrics described by Omri, freedom and dignity permeated Tunisians' collective sentiments and actions following Bouazizi's death. Security forces killed unarmed civilians while trying to disperse crowds in Bouazizi's hometown of Sidi Bouzid, even opening fire and killing three people during his funeral procession. Protests spread to nearby Kasserine, where crowds began to demand not simply justice for Bouazizi but the overthrow of Ben Ali. Somewhat distinct from earlier movements during the Bourguiba regime, which focused primarily on the indignity of torture and impediments to free assembly, activists under Ben Ali referred from the outset to the dignity of work. Ben Ali's well-known corruption and life of luxury were all the more insulting for Tunisians who increasingly struggled to make ends meet. Unemployment under Bourguiba (1957-1987) steadily declined from approximately 14 percent to 10 percent over the course of the 1970s.³⁸ Though official figures under Ben Ali (1987-2011) put the Tunisian unemployment rate at 13.2 percent in 2010, other estimates place that figure at closer to 25 percent, with youth unemployment rates at over 30 percent for those aged fifteen to twenty-four.³⁹ Far higher unemployment figures exist outside of coastal areas for the most disadvantaged South and Midwest regions of Tunisia, such as Bouazizi's hometown in Sidi Bouzid. It is no surprise then, that Tunisian protesters like Marwan al-Jamali, who held a university diploma but was unemployed, called out during the demonstrations, "'We want employment, O gang of thieves' and 'Jobs, freedom, dignity, and patriotism.'"⁴⁰ That day

³⁵ Omri, "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry," 140.

³⁶ Omri, "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry," 140.

³⁷ Omri, "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry," 140.

³⁸ See "Tunisie: évolution du taux de chômage entre 1970 et 2010," accessed online 26 July 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Tunisie-evolution-du-taux-de-chomage-entre-1970-et-2010-41_fig4_335920404

³⁹ Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution," 20-21. See also Figure 1.1, "Youth and overall unemployment rates," in *Studies on Growth with Equity: Tunisia, A New Social Contract for Fair and Equitable Growth* (International Labour Organization, International Institute for Labour Studies, 2011), 12. Accessed 26 July 2023, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/--documents/publication/wcms_164544.pdf.

⁴⁰ Abès Hamid, "Tunisian Revolution: Gaining our Freedom and Dignity," in *Voices of the Arab Spring*, 23-24.

authorities shot him in the chest; he died on the way to the hospital. His unwarranted death while proclaiming the dignity of employment spawned further outrage for a long history of abuses under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali.

As an observer, participant, and judge, Abès Hamid noted that, “We Tunisians realized that this regime violated all human rights, carried out torture and repression, and encouraged corruption that spread throughout all the state institutions, including the judicial system and the security forces.”⁴¹ It wasn’t that the WikiLeaks documents—like those detailing massive corruption of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families in power—revealed anything new to Tunisians. Social media scholar Zeineb Touati found that, on the contrary, the Wikileaks cables, “allowed the world to discover what Tunisians already knew.”⁴² Given that Tunisians’ daily encounters with the regime made them well aware of the extent of its corruption, it was not for lack of knowledge that resistance stayed below the surface until Bouazizi’s martyrdom. Touati’s findings suggest that Facebook and Twitter were not the primary generators of revolution; rather, they simply helped mobilize already existing networks and coordinate activism in the streets, which was the real success story in removing Ben Ali from power. Social media was also important in connecting with international communities of solidarity, particularly the sizable population of expatriates and exiled political dissidents in France.

With Facebook and Twitter under scrutiny and other political bloggers often censured or blocked by Ben Ali’s “Ammar 404” cybersecurity program, SMS messaging often filled the information vacuum and delivered news to Tunisia’s diasporic communities. According to the French Institute for Demographic Studies, there are approximately 300,000 Tunisian immigrants presently living in France, while the number of those who identify as Tunisian (with Tunisian heritage) is possibly as high as one million, including over 13,000 university students.⁴³ Just as Tunisians used Facebook to request military intervention in neighborhoods that faced looting and violence by armed gangs in the chaotic days of the Revolution, social media also “sensitized and mobilized international public opinion in countries like France, Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland.”⁴⁴ Lynn Hunt has argued that modern ideas about human rights and the autonomy of self were in part generated through new eighteenth-century cultural practices.⁴⁵ According to Hunt, “New kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights).”⁴⁶ She argued that

⁴¹ Hamid, “Tunisian Revolution, 21.

⁴² Zeineb Touati, “La révolution tunisienne : interactions entre militantisme de terrain et mobilisation des réseaux sociaux,” *L’Année du Maghreb VIII* (2012): 121-141, <https://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/1426>.

⁴³ Figures found online at the following sites online: <https://www.ined.fr/fr/tout-savoir-population/chiffres/france/immigres-etranagers/immigres-pays-naissance/> and <https://www.tunisie numerique.com/france-la-tunisie-classee-cinquieme-en-nombre-detudiants-etranagers/>.

⁴⁴ Touati, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

⁴⁶ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 33-34.

reading epistolary novels, which questioned absolutism or patriarchy, generated emotional connection to, and empathy for, fictional characters with whom readers identified, leading to demands for expanded human rights. A similar case could be made for the role of social media as a new cultural practice during the Arab Spring in relation to human dignity. In this case, any global onlooker with an internet connection could view powerful images of revolutionary activity and unconscionable state repression in Tunisia, or what Omri termed a “local imaging of dignity” that spread outward.⁴⁷ The consumption, sharing, comment on, and analysis of these images and their descriptions generated empathy for others and produced collective demands to recognize Tunisian dignity.

Social media access led to increased engagement from organizations abroad like the Nantes Redeyif Collective, which was created to support the 2008 Gafsa miners’ strike. Interestingly, Touati discovered that its numbers and participation in 2011 far outpaced its original purpose. These networks of diasporic Tunisians helped to transmit and verify information that transnational media would later pick up. Tunisians on the ground in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and later in Tunis called out “fake news” emanating from the Ben Ali regime. They shared images and recordings of protest events and state repression via personal cell phones and text messages that reached audiences abroad. David Faris found that although Ben Ali’s Tunisia was far more successful at censoring web use than its neighbors in Egypt, that did not prevent exiled activists like Sami Ben Gharbia, co-founder of the blog *Nawaat* (core), from criticizing the regime from Europe and advising frontline activists on how to circumvent authorities online.⁴⁸ Internet activist Lina Ben Mhenni organized a protest against web censorship in May 2010, recalling that, “it was the first time that we let go of our fears and succeeded in convincing people to pass from the Internet to the real world.”⁴⁹ Active engagement from exiled figures like Ben Gharbia and Lina Ben Mhenni helped early mobilizations in Tunisia even before Bouazizi inspired a full-scale national uprising.

Others residing in France, like Tunisian student Nada Maalmi, watched with great curiosity as French parliamentarians offered to lend French *savoir faire* to help Ben Ali secure the situation. “A dramatic controversy erupted, and therefore the French government had to choose whom to support: the unwanted president Ben Ali or the demonstrators seeking freedom and dignity.”⁵⁰ From a distance, Tunisian networks of information helped bring news to diasporic Tunisians who could then find out how best to participate in the movement.

I think that the videos and photos shared through social networking supported the revolution in two ways. First, it showed Tunisian individuals that they were not alone—

⁴⁷ Omri, “A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry,” 140.

⁴⁸ David Faris, “La Révolte en réseau: le ‘printemps arabe’ et les médias sociaux,” *Revue politique étrangère* 1 (2012): 106.

⁴⁹ Faris, “La Révolte en réseau,” 106. Lina Ben Mhenni tragically passed away in 2020 at age 36 from complications related to an autoimmune disease.

⁵⁰ Nada Maalmi, “The Smell of Jasmine: The Tunisian Revolution from the Outside,” in *Voices of the Arab Spring*, 49.

that other people cared about their revolution and supported it. These postings included people criticizing the government and its policies. Other people were sharing thoughts and comments about what was occurring during the revolution. The impression of unity given by this virtual space strengthened the unity in the streets.⁵¹

While the postcolonial networks of activism had assumed a new shape since the days of 1968, they were equally important in generating international empathy and connecting Tunisians who may have been living abroad as exiles, students, or immigrant workers. Sweeping changes at the national level that seemed impossible in 1968 became much more of a reality when powerful internet images were converted into real world action.

Of course, not all Franco-Tunisian connections worked to dismantle the regime's power. French *Mediapart* journalists L  naig Bredoux and Mathieu Magnaudeix uncovered an entire cadre of French elites, on both the right and left, who collectively turned a blind eye to Tunisian corruption to further French business interests and foreign policy initiatives. From the administrations of Mitterrand to Chirac to Sarkozy, French leadership largely welcomed the arrival of Ben Ali, who thwarted political threats from both Islamic fundamentalists and left-wing socialists seeking to nationalize Tunisian industries in which the French were strongly entrenched. In exchange for Tunisian cooperation, French authorities tolerated the presence of Tunisian secret surveillance operatives on French soil—even actively working with them to spy on Ben Ali's political opponents—while French financial services provided favorable terms to Tunisian elites despite dubious banking practices.⁵²

Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the former French Prime Minister in Jaques Chirac's mid-2000s center-right government, admitted to an "error in national judgment" from "diplomats of the Quai d'Orsay, the economic class, the political class. Among the leadership, the error of analysis was global."⁵³ Similarly, Socialist senator and head of the political alliance *France-Tunisie*, Jean-Pierre Sueur, confessed, "We must have the courage to say it: the political class in France, and I include myself in that group, was too sensitive to the argument of the fundamentalist threat."⁵⁴ From the days of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) through Ben Ali's reign (1987-2011), French fears of either left-wing nationalizing projects or Islamic leadership in Tunisia led those in power to tolerate wide evidence of corruption and human rights abuses, and equate authoritarianism with stability. And the significant French resources, which propped up Tunisian dictators, actively worked against vibrant dissident movements, possibly delaying widespread

⁵¹ Maalmi, "The Smell of Jasmine," 49.

⁵² On collaboration between French authorities and Tunisian operatives, see "L'Hexagon, un terrain de jeu pour Ben Ali," in L  naig Bredoux and Mathieu Magnaudeix, *Tunis Connection: Enqu  te sur les r  seaux franco-tunisiens sous Ben Ali* (Paris:   ditions du Seuil, 2012), 185-216; on financial favors, see "Les affaires sont les affaires," in Bredoux and Magnaudeix, *Tunis Connection*, 217-226.

⁵³ Bredoux and Magnaudeix, *Tunis Connection*, 16-17.

⁵⁴ Bredoux and Magnaudeix, *Tunis Connection*, 17.

national resistance with roots dating to the 1960s.⁵⁵ Despite French leadership's willful ignorance of Ben Ali's reign of terror, it is clear that French networks of activists continued the fight to restore Tunisian dignity in the 2008 Gafsa mining strikes and again in 2011. While these networks may not have been as vital as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, postcolonial connections remained critical to establishing collective solidarity. They at once enabled diasporic Tunisians and global sympathizers to feel that they were part of the resistance while crystallizing unity with Tunisians on the ground.

Conclusion

Although human rights have often been foregrounded in analyses of Tunisian activism under both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, my reading suggests that human dignity merits similar attention regarding anti-authoritarian activism in postcolonial Tunisia. Figures like Othmani and Bouziri may not have fought for the same causes in the 1960s and early 1970s (prison reform versus immigrants' rights), but dignity functioned similarly in both cases. What began with conjuring individual dignity to overcome a specific form of repression—whether bodily torture or threat of deportation—was transformed into determined advocacy for the collective dignity of others. Decades of corrupt governance led Tunisians in 2010-2011 to identify with Mohamed Bouazizi's suffering and humiliation. His individual act of self-immolation to express despair with attacks on his dignity inspired recognition from Tunisians at home and abroad.

Sympathizers of French nationality played a significant role in resisting Bourguiba's earlier authoritarianism both during and after Tunisia's 1968. Postcolonial networks based in places like Paris and Nantes remained important during the Arab Spring, yet these consisted primarily of diasporic Tunisians living abroad, with a less visible French presence. Some scholars have downplayed the postcolonial dimensions of the Arab Spring, positing that "these revolutionary uprisings are postideological, meaning they are no longer fighting according to terms dictated by their condition of coloniality, codenamed 'postcolonial.'"⁵⁶ I would argue instead that while the network characteristics and conduits of information exchange no doubt transformed over time, in both cases cross-border solidarities expressed the recognition of the dignity of distant others. Postcolonial ties still bring significant numbers of Tunisians to France for study and work, and French leadership continues to weigh significantly on Tunisian politics, enabling Ben Ali's corruption once he was deemed convenient to the interests of the French government.

Perhaps one of the most important actions of the post-Ben Ali government was the law that established a Truth and Dignity Commission to investigate, document, and publicize human rights violations committed since 1955 under the two dictatorships. The commission generated a

⁵⁵ For an analysis of the 1960s student movement in Tunisia that failed to expand beyond campuses, see Idriss Jebari, "Illegitimate Children': The Tunisian New Left and the Student Question, 1963-1975," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (2022): 100-123.

⁵⁶ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 10.

lengthy Executive Summary Report in 2019, which named Ahmed Othmani's torturers and described the attacks on his human dignity. Similar accounts of abuse during the Bourguiba era are placed alongside those of women who more recently were intimidated, stalked, and beaten by Ben Ali operatives. The commission further laid out key details of the revolutionary unrest leading to Ben Ali's removal from power. This important committee work was done for Tunisians and by Tunisians after the dictatorship had fallen.

While it is clear that Franco-Tunisian networks were less essential to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution of Freedom and Dignity as in 1968, they often acted as the first point of contact with the international community and a critical relay point to transmit information to the outside world. Current Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed has moved Tunisian democracy backward by suspending and then dissolving parliament in the last year. Over the summer 2022, he began to dismiss judges and undermine the judiciary unconstitutionally, culminating in a call to redraft the Constitution to increase his executive power. At present he is distracting Tunisians from domestic woes with attacks on sub-Saharan African migrants. His actions have elicited strong condemnation from the Paris-based International Association of Lawyers. Saïed's recent dismantling of Tunisia's system of checks and balances underlines the need for continued outside pressure to uphold Tunisia's post-revolutionary reckoning with human rights violations and its quest to protect the human dignity of its people.

Burleigh Hendrickson is Assistant Professor in the department of French & Francophone Studies at Penn State University. He is the author of *Decolonizing 1968: Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar* (Cornell University Press, 2022) which was awarded the French Colonial Historical Society's 2023 Alf Andrew Heggoy Prize. The author wishes to thank the Penn State Humanities Institute, the *JWSFH* peer reviewers and editorial team for their helpful suggestions for improvement, and Kathleen Keller for providing comment at an early stage of writing.