



The Youssefist–Bourguibist Conflict following the Outbreak of the Algerian Revolution

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Abstract

This article examines the Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict in Tunisia during the 1950s, against the backdrop of the intensification of the Tunisian nationalist movement’s struggle against French colonial rule and the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in 1954. It argues that the conflict within the Neo Destour Party was not merely an organizational dispute, but reflected a profound disagreement over the nature of independence itself. The pragmatic Bourguibist current favored a gradualist strategy based on negotiation with France. In contrast, the more radical Youssefist current rejected any form of limited or incomplete independence and called for full independence within the framework of a broader Maghrebi and Arab liberation project. The article also explores the role of the Algerian Revolution in deepening this division and accelerating negotiations with France, developments that ultimately shaped the character of Tunisian independence in 1956. It concludes that the Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict constituted a decisive historical turning point, reshaping the trajectory of the Tunisian nationalist movement. It helped define the principal features of the post-independence Tunisian state within a broader context of regional and international dynamics.

Keywords: Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict; Tunisian nationalist movement; French colonial rule; Algerian Revolution; Tunisian independence; Neo Destour Party; Habib Bourguiba; Salah Ben Youssef; the Maghreb; national liberation movements.

Introduction

During the first half of the 1950s, Tunisia experienced a highly complex and sensitive political period marked by the intensification of the national struggle against French colonialism and the intersection of political and organizational trajectories within the nationalist movement. These developments unfolded within a changing regional and international context shaped by the end of the Second World War and the emergence of a new international order based on bipolarity between the capitalist and socialist blocs, alongside the growth of national liberation movements in Asia and Africa and the accompanying transformations in the conception of colonialism and the methods employed to resist it. Within this broader framework, Tunisia was not isolated from



its surroundings. However, it was part of an interconnected Maghrebi sphere, directly affected by developments in Algeria and Morocco, particularly the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in 1954, which constituted a decisive turning point in the region's history.

Amid this context, an acute internal conflict emerged within the Neo Destour Party between Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef. This conflict was not merely an organizational disagreement or a rivalry for leadership; rather, it developed into an ideological and political confrontation over the nature of the independence being sought, the limits of engagement with France, and the future of Tunisia's relationship with its Arab and Maghrebi surroundings. Bourguiba represented a current inclined toward political gradualism and a negotiated settlement with France that would initially secure internal autonomy and subsequently be further developed. Salah Ben Youssef, by contrast, adopted a more uncompromising position based on the rejection of any form of incomplete independence and the call for comprehensive independence linked to a broader Maghrebi and Arab liberation project, particularly in light of the intensification of armed struggle in Algeria and the increasing coordination among liberation movements in the region.

The central question addressed in this article is as follows:

To what extent may the Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict be regarded as the result of an ideological and strategic divergence within the Tunisian nationalist movement, and how did the Algerian Revolution and regional and international transformations contribute to deepening this division and directing Tunisia's path toward independence in the form adopted in 1956?

To answer this question, the article adopts a historical, analytical, and descriptive approach based on a set of scholarly methods, the most important of which are:

- The historical method, through tracing the sequence of political events from the beginnings of the nationalist movement to independence, helps us understand the development of the conflict within its chronological context.
- The analytical method examines the positions of the principal political actors, Bourguiba and Ben Youssef, and their supporters, and analyzes their ideological and political foundations.
- The comparative method highlights the differences between two distinct conceptions of independence: a gradualist, negotiated vision and a comprehensive, radical vision.
- The explanatory method connects internal factors to the partisan conflict and the structure of the nationalist movement with external factors to the Algerian Revolution, international transformations, and French policy in North Africa.
- The article also adopts a contextual approach to understanding the event within its Maghrebi regional and historical environment rather than an isolated national framework.

Thus, this study seeks to demonstrate that the Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict constituted a pivotal moment that reshaped the trajectory of the Tunisian nationalist movement and largely determined the nature of the independence subsequently achieved. It also reflects the profound interconnectedness of the liberation processes in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco within a shared



Maghrebi context, where national, regional, and international dimensions were closely intertwined.

First: The Historical and Ideological Foundations of the Youssefist–Bourguibist Division

The Algerian Revolution began within both Arab and Maghrebi frameworks. The base established in Tunisia for the Algerian Revolution reflected all these dimensions, particularly the Maghrebi dimension. Tunisia, however, was then experiencing an internal division that began at the very outset of the Algerian Revolution. This division between Habib Bourguiba, president of the Neo Destour Party, and the party's secretary-general had ideological and historical foundations.

1. Historical Background

The Second World War destabilized the international balance inherited from the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Europe's great powers were no longer the same after the war. The power of major states such as France and England declined in favor of the "union states," while new powers emerged outside Europe, including the United States and the Soviet Union. The world thus became divided between two competing forces: American capitalist power and Soviet communist power.

The new world order produced by the war was characterized by the emergence of new "allied yet competing" powers.¹ France emerged from the war exhausted despite its victories, lost its commercial influence to the United States, and became subject to the Marshall Plan, which had become an ideological weapon against communism. France then recognized its weakness in the face of the new powers dominating the world and resented falling under the "protective shadow" of the United States, even indirectly. It therefore sought to create a political and economic power by grouping its overseas spheres of influence within the "French Union," established under Title VIII of the 1946 Constitution.

The French Union was not a federal state but an association composed of the French Republic, which included metropolitan France, the overseas departments and territories, and the associated territories and states (*associés*), as defined by the Constitution. The French government remained the actual governing authority of the Union. According to Guy de Carmoy, the Union was based on the following principles:

- A voluntary partnership between metropolitan France and the dependent territories;
- Complete integration between the French and the inhabitants of the dependent territories;
- The granting of a special, more decentralized administrative system to the territories under the supervision of local councils elected by universal suffrage.

The Union excluded any notion of independence and any possibility of development outside the framework of the French Empire.²

¹ Aroussia al-Turki, *The Youssefist Movement in Tunisia, 1955–1956* (Sfax: Dar Nuha, 2011), 13.

² Al-Turki, *The Youssefist Movement in Tunisia*, 18.



Perhaps the most significant feature of the period following the Second World War was that postwar conditions created a favorable framework for the emergence of national liberation movements in the colonies and for a gradual withdrawal from colonial domination, supported by the new international organization, the United Nations, and the regional organization, the League of Arab States. These circumstances also generated support for the Maghrebi countries' pursuit of independence. Several countries attained independence, including India in 1947, Indonesia in 1949, and Libya in 1951. This period also witnessed the emergence of prominent national leaders, such as Nehru in India, Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Tito in Yugoslavia, and others who helped shape the Non-Aligned Movement at the Bandung Conference in April 1955.

French policy after the Second World War, therefore, centered on identifying prospective negotiators within its colonies who would conform to this previously devised plan, so that even if self-determination were granted, it would occur within the framework of the French Union rather than outside it. This system resembled the British Commonwealth. In Tunisia, the Old Destour Party, led by Abdelaziz Thâalbi, constituted an obstacle to France's efforts to find a negotiator whose project was compatible with the French Union. Bourguiba had long embraced this orientation and succeeded in laying the groundwork for France even before the emergence of what would become known as the French Union. He broke away from the old party and founded the Neo Destour Party at the Ksar Hellal Congress in 1934.

He won the support of the Tunisian people because his position seemed radical at the time. Nevertheless, he relied on currents of thought emerging from within France that presented him as secular in orientation and nationally independent of France, a position then embodied by Habib Bourguiba. While detained and appearing before an investigating judge on June 15, 1938, Bourguiba declared: "Tunisia's internal autonomy will, in my view, form part of the French Empire, which will retain the right to oversee our foreign affairs." When the investigating judge told him that Mr. Vienot had affirmed the permanent character of the French protectorate over Tunisia, Bourguiba replied: "We do not oppose France's direct participation in the administration of the country, and we applauded Vienot's statements."³

Although Bourguiba held this position, Salah Ben Youssef, at the beginning of his political struggle, was similar to Bourguiba, at least in his French education and liberal orientation. Both men were eager to follow the French intellectual currents of the time and entered the legal profession. In 1935, when the detained members of the party were exiled to southern Tunisia, they signed a letter stating that they were not enemies of France. Bourguiba and Ben Youssef were among its signatories.⁴

³ Moncef al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef: A Life of Struggle*, 2nd ed. (Tunis: Dar Nuqush, 2007), 96.

⁴ Al-Turki, *The Youssefist Movement in Tunisia*, 88.



2. The Foundational Emergence of Bilateral French-Tunisian Negotiations: Contexts and Mechanisms of Interaction

Within Tunisia, Salah Ben Youssef succeeded in organizing the Neo Destour Party along modern lines. He established party branches and mass organizations, including the General Union of Agriculture and the General Union of Industry and Commerce. He also contributed to the establishment of the Tunisian General Labor Union. In Cairo, Bourguiba received reports concerning all that Salah Ben Youssef was undertaking, together with allegations that Ben Youssef and Mongi Slim were seeking to remove him from the party presidency. Hédi Nourira was responsible for spreading these rumors. This prompted Bourguiba to hasten his return to Tunisia in 1949. He persuaded Egyptian politicians that he had to leave because Ben Youssef and Mongi Slim had betrayed the movement. He concealed the agreement he had reached with the French embassy in Cairo, in which he had expressed his willingness to negotiate with France, contingent on Tunisia granting reforms in exchange for a treaty conferring significant strategic and economic privileges on France. This was the real reason that prompted his return.⁵

This raises a question regarding the growing calls for substantive reforms following Bourguiba's return to Tunisia in 1949. Shortly thereafter, on July 27, 1949, Lamine Bey asked Resident-General Mons to introduce the necessary reforms to satisfy the aspirations of the Tunisian people and meet their demands. He also wrote to the president of the Republic on April 11, 1950.⁶ The party subsequently held a congress on May 28 and 29, 1950, at which it formulated seven demands for negotiation, which Bourguiba alone took to Paris.⁷ Events then accelerated rapidly. In July, the French government, through its foreign minister, recognized Tunisians' right to govern their country. On this basis, the government of Mohamed Chenik entered into negotiations with the French concerning the transfer of internal authority to the Tunisians. The government was formed on August 17, 1950, and consisted of six Tunisian ministers and six French ministers.⁸

Bourguiba refused to join the government and insisted that Salah Ben Youssef do so; Ben Youssef was therefore appointed minister of justice.⁹ Did Bourguiba intend, through this proposal, to implicate him in the government, or did Ben Youssef himself wish to participate? This question is particularly relevant because Bourguiba had previously accused Salah Ben Youssef of colluding with Thameur and seeking to remove him. The activist Abdelkader Zarrouk, however, maintained that Salah Ben Youssef joined the Chenik government only as a tactical

⁵ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 74–76.

⁶ Mohamed al-Said Aqib, "Developments in the Tunisian Crisis in the Early 1950s as Reflected in the Algerian Newspaper *Al-Manar*," *Al-Hikma Journal for Historical Studies*, no. 7 (first half of 2016): 52.

⁷ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 114.

⁸ Aqib, "Developments in the Tunisian Crisis," 53.

⁹ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 115–16.



maneuver intended to induce the bey to authorize the government to internationalize the national question and submit it to the United Nations.¹⁰

The Neo Destour Party's acceptance of negotiations with the French provoked opposition from the Old Destour Party, led by Mohieddine Klibi, who had been offered participation in the government. He issued statements condemning the negotiations and declared the process a failure in advance.¹¹ Emir Abdelkrim al-Khattabi also condemned the negotiations and issued a lengthy signed statement in the name of the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb. It stated: "For all these reasons, we declare our condemnation of the Neo Destour Party's participation in this experiment, and we regard such participation as a violation of the Charter of the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb and as recognition of conditions that the committee does not accept. We likewise declare our firm opposition to the outcome of this experiment, which runs counter to national aspirations and infringes upon the essence of Tunisian sovereignty, which must belong exclusively to the Tunisian people, without the participation of others. We also warn the party that the danger arising from its continued participation in this experiment will not be confined to Tunisia alone, but will also affect the two sister countries, Algeria and Morocco. It now faces a grave responsibility: preserving the integrity of the independence movement throughout the countries of the Arab Maghreb and preventing it from being exposed to fragmentation and collapse through the diversion of its course, the violation of its covenants, and the disintegration and dissolution of the unity of solidarity among its constituent movements."¹²

This government and the negotiations, however, did not last long and ultimately failed, particularly following the events in Morocco in 1952, the encirclement of the royal palace by tanks, and the Tunisian nationalist movement's support for Mohammed V in his struggle against the protectorate authorities. On January 18, 1952, the French authorities arrested Mongi Slim and Bourguiba, while Ben Youssef managed to escape¹³ following a congress at which he is reported to have issued an explicit call for armed struggle. Acts of sabotage subsequently began, including the severing of telephone lines, the cutting of water pipelines, and the organization of demonstrations in the cities. The organization Voice of the Zaytuna Student, however, took the lead in establishing the nucleus of armed struggle in the mountains.¹⁴ Farhat Hached led the campaign of strikes and popular demonstrations, particularly throughout southern Tunisia, including Sfax, Gabès, Gafsa, Tozeur, Médenine, and Zarzis.¹⁵ Events developed into a revolution that no one had anticipated. Sheik Mohieddine Klibi was asked whether they could withstand a French siege for several months. He replied, "I do not think so; perhaps for a few

¹⁰ Ammar al-Soufi, previously cited work, 54–55.

¹¹ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 77.

¹² *Al-Manar* 1, no. 6 (July 30, 1951): 4.

¹³ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 100.

¹⁴ Al-Soufi, previously cited work, 55.

¹⁵ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 101.



weeks.” However, the revolution continued for more than two years.¹⁶ Those who had been active within the Neo Destour Party and the Tunisian General Labor Union joined the fighters in the mountains. They prepared men trained in the use of weapons, some of whom had previously been in Palestine. Tahar Lassoued was the first to take up arms and establish the Tunisian Liberation Army.¹⁷

France mobilized all its resources to defeat this revolution. It formed the “Red Hand” organization, which began eliminating prominent figures of the resistance. It succeeded in assassinating the trade union leader Farhat Hached on December 5, 1952, and the nationalist leader Hédi Chaker in exile on September 13, 1953. Some interpretations maintain that these assassinations were intended to remove the leading symbols of resistance and thereby make way for other figures who would prove more accommodating in safeguarding France’s future interests. The resistance nevertheless continued, inflaming the spirit of jihad. Groups proliferated, including the “Black Hand,” which carried out assassinations against several Tunisian collaborators who served France.¹⁸ By 1954, the number of fighters had reached approximately 3,000, and most of their weapons were remnants of the Second World War.¹⁹

Second: The Interaction of the Youssefist–Bourguibist Conflict with the Algerian Revolution and Its Repercussions for the Revolution’s Base in Tunisia (1954–1956)

The Youssefist–Bourguibist dispute was no longer merely a local conflict; the Algerian Revolution now had a stake in it because of the dispute’s effects on the Revolution’s activities within Tunisia.

1. The Impact of the French Defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Strengthening the Position of the Algerian Revolution: The Shift in French-Tunisian Negotiations

By the end of 1953 and the beginning of 1954, the French government had begun to question the effectiveness of its repressive measures and the tightening of the military siege imposed upon the political and armed wings of the Tunisian nationalist movement. France, therefore, decided to pursue a new course to open dialogue by forming a new government and replacing the military and political personnel who controlled affairs in Tunisia. These possibilities were promoted in the press, but they elicited no response from the nationalists, and France feared that it might already be too late. It consequently accelerated its efforts, and the possibility of a federal arrangement linking Morocco and Tunisia to France was announced, while granting both countries broad latitude in the administration of their internal affairs.

The Neo Destour Party responded on February 4, 1954, affirming that the only solution lay in Tunisia’s recovery of its full sovereignty. On the same day, Salah Ben Youssef declared, “France has made many promises, but it has never fulfilled any of the promises it made. The nationalist

¹⁶ Al-Soufi, previously cited work, 56.

¹⁷ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 103.

¹⁸ Al-Soufi, previously cited work, 59–62.

¹⁹ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 104.



movement, and the Neo Destour Party in particular, has lost confidence in France and is not prepared to reopen dialogue with it while its leaders, especially Habib Bourguiba, remain in French prisons and places of exile. Let us begin with their release, and then we shall consider the political proposals that France wishes to present to us.”²⁰ France, however, adopted a different approach in order to retain the initiative. After removing the puppet government headed by Slaheddine Baccouche, it decided to replace the “bloody pair”: General Garbay, commander in chief of the armed forces, and Resident-General de Hauteclocque. Pierre Voizard was appointed the new resident-general.²¹

On July 31, 1954, Mendès France arrived in Tunisia to announce to Muhammad al-Amin Bey that France was prepared to grant Tunisia autonomy as part of negotiations between the Tunisian and French governments.²² His arrival came after France had come under mounting pressure from the Indochinese Revolution in Vietnam, following the capture of the Dien Bien Phu stronghold by Ho Chi Minh's revolutionaries, the Vietnamese leader's demand for full independence, and the spread of armed struggle in Tunisia and Morocco.²³ This prompted Mendès France to contact Mohamed Masmoudi, the Neo Destour Party's representative in France. Masmoudi replied that the problem could be resolved only by contacting Habib Bourguiba, removing him from exile, and entering into discussions with him.²⁴

The head of the French government assigned Deputy Alain Savary to negotiate with Bourguiba. Savary thus served as an intermediary between Bourguiba and French politicians. France launched a media campaign aimed at dividing the nationalist movement into two categories: an uncompromising faction with which dialogue was impossible, and another faction prepared to negotiate. In this context, Habib Bourguiba, from his exile on the island of Groix in western France, gave numerous interviews to leading French newspapers. On each occasion, he affirmed that his party bore no responsibility for acts of violence, as reported by *Paris Match* on June 3, 1954, and *Le Monde* on June 5, 1954.²⁵ Thereafter, the French negotiator began creating difficulties once he had secured the party president's denunciation of armed struggle.

Salah Ben Youssef, the party's secretary-general, however, told the press in Geneva that “he was not particularly interested in internal autonomy and preferred to use the term ‘Home Rule’ because it conferred national sovereignty more broadly.” Some accounts state that Salah Ben Youssef adopted an uncompromising position toward this new policy and warned his colleagues against yielding to promises that were not commensurate with the scale of the national struggle and the sacrifices made by the Tunisian people, particularly during the preceding three years. The

²⁰ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 142.

²¹ Ali Belhadi and Abdelrazak Ghandir, previously cited work, 55.

²² Moussa al-Dhawi, *Insights into the Youssefist Movement in the Tataouine Region, 1955–1956*, 1st ed. (Sfax, Tunisia: al-Tasfir al-Fanni Press, 2018), 67.

²³ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 112.

²⁴ Belhadi and Ghandir, previously cited work, 55–56.

²⁵ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 151.



new government proceeded to the negotiating table. After the negotiations began on August 18, 1954, however, they were suspended because of the escalation of commando operations and the intensification of fighting throughout the country. The French side broke off the negotiations, maintaining that France would not engage in dialogue while weapons were brandished against it.²⁶ Meanwhile, the revolution began to snowball, spreading not only in Tunisia but also in Algeria and Morocco. Groups trained in Egypt and Libya, the Mazra'a and Kubra al-Qubba camps, began infiltrating southern Tunisia and the border region with Algeria as part of a program to unify the struggles of the Maghrebi countries, which was being quietly prepared by the leaders Abdelkrim al-Khattabi, Ahmed Ben Bella, and Salah Ben Youssef in coordination with the Egyptian authorities.²⁷ For this purpose, a follow-up cell was established within the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb to carry out this undertaking.²⁸ Vaujour Léonard stated in a secret report dated October 23, 1954, that "the danger may be imminent," referring to the activities of the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb in Cairo and affirming that the committee sought "to launch immediate military action in order to compel the Algerian Muslim masses to join the revolution."²⁹

The report added: "This was not the first time that Mr. Vaujour had sounded the alarm. In April 1954, they prepared a lengthy document entitled 'The North African Commandos,' which revealed, at the outset, the existence of organized groups in Egypt, Libya, and even in Spanish Morocco and Spain. These terrorist organizations are under the patronage of Emir Abdelkrim and his brother, Mohamed al-Khattabi. They receive material and moral support from the Egyptian and Libyan governments and from the Arab League, which provides military training and maintains the volunteers. Khider, the former deputy, Aït Ahmed, and Ben Bella are concerned with this matter.' The report made another revelation: the establishment in Tripoli of a 'Liberation Army' composed of young North Africans. A commando training camp was also established on a farm near Ismailia in Egypt, where twenty-five men received training before completing it in Libya."³⁰

The supporters of Bourguiba and those of Salah Ben Youssef, however, began issuing contradictory statements. Mohamed Masmoudi wrote an article in *Al-Sabah* on September 5, 1954, in which he affirmed that "the negotiations cannot continue in an atmosphere filled with apprehension and insecurity, and that trust and caution are necessary for their success." He then expressed his condemnation of what were called terrorist acts in cities and villages, regardless of their source or motives. By contrast, one of Salah Ben Youssef's supporters, Azzouz Rebai, president of the Destourian Youth, delivered a speech warning the Tunisian delegation against

²⁶ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 152–53.

²⁷ Al-Soufi, previously cited work, 71.

²⁸ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 155.

²⁹ Claude Paillat, *Deuxième dossier secret de l'Algérie* (Paris: Les Presses de la Cité, 1962), 11–13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.



the negotiations. He stated: “There can be no question of incomplete independence. The Tunisian people will accept no language through which to express their sovereignty other than full independence. How can the government permit itself to negotiate for internal autonomy when it has been established that the party’s objective is full independence? This is conclusive evidence of bad faith and of designs against the interests of the Tunisian people.” The negotiations resumed on September 4, 1954.

To set the record straight, Salah Ben Youssef sent a memorandum to the League of Arab States on May 17, 1955, in which he declared his historic position of total rejection of these agreements and of the protocol that had been concluded. As he stated, “This agreement closes the door to any hope of attaining Tunisia’s full independence; it also confirms Tunisia’s permanent dependence on France.”³¹ He added in his report: “I believe that if these agreements are implemented, our national integrity will be threatened, because they confirm a colonial system imposed upon us and intended to integrate us into the French Union.

“Moreover, acceptance of these agreements would amount to a repudiation of the principles of our party, the Neo Destour Party. For this reason, on April 24 of last year, I issued the attached statements,³² in which I warned the Tunisian and French governments of the grave consequences of implementing the provisions of these agreements. Now that the Tunisian government is on the verge of ratifying them, I have decided to assume responsibility and oppose them publicly.”³³

2. The Repercussions of the Outbreak of the Algerian Revolution (November 1954) on France’s Accelerated Pursuit of Internal Autonomy Agreements in Tunisia

Two months after the resumption of the French-Tunisian negotiations, the Algerian Revolution broke out on November 1, 1954, causing the negotiations to take a different course. In Paris, the negotiating ministers called upon the occupation authorities to declare a truce to permit dialogue with the armed revolutionaries and persuade them to cease fighting.³⁴ Mendès France hastened to hold a secret meeting with Bourguiba in November 1954. During the meeting, Bourguiba proposed to the head of the French government that he would guarantee the revolutionaries’ surrender of their weapons, provided that Mendès France guaranteed their safety and that the French army ceased pursuing them.³⁵

On November 20, 1954, the French government and the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior issued a joint communiqué regarding the surrender of the revolutionaries’ weapons. It stated that “the Tunisian government publicly calls upon the fellaghas to surrender their weapons to the French and Tunisian authorities. Under the agreement concluded between them, the French resident-

³¹ CVCE.eu, Archives nationales d’outre-mer (ANOM), “Note from Salah Ben Youssef to the Arab States concerning the Franco-Tunisian Agreements,” 3–4.

³² This refers to the statements Salah Ben Youssef made to the press in Cairo.

³³ CVCE.eu, ANOM, “Note from Salah Ben Youssef,” 3.

³⁴ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 153–55.

³⁵ Habib Bourguiba, *My Life, My Ideas, My Struggle* (Tunis: Publications of the State Secretariat for Information, 1978), 249.



general and the Tunisian government also pledge that the fellaghas will neither be harassed nor pursued.”³⁶ Salah Ben Youssef opposed the surrender of arms.³⁷ Bourguiba responded in *France-Observateur* on January 5, 1955, to the statement that Salah Ben Youssef had made in Geneva on December 31, 1954. Bourguiba declared, “Our party was formed to achieve Tunisia’s independence with the support of France. The bold ideas underlying this course, as I have always believed and maintained, will sooner or later triumph over the advocates of absolute nationalism and the die-hard proponents of colonialism. History is movement, and French-Tunisian friendship is enduring.”³⁸

In an effort to swiftly contain the dispute and impose Bourguiba's and the French government's positions on Salah Ben Youssef, Bourguiba held a final negotiating session with French Prime Minister Edgar Faure on April 21, 1955. The two negotiating parties reached a preliminary agreement stipulating that the conventions would be signed no later than May 30, 1955. They were initialed on May 24, 1955, formally signed in Paris on June 3, 1955, and ratified by the bey on August 27, 1955.³⁹

When Salah Ben Youssef learned of the latest negotiations at the Bandung Conference, he called for rejecting the conventions, arguing that their acceptance would constitute a betrayal of the Afro-Asian bloc that had supported the North African cause.⁴⁰ On May 17, 1955, *Al-Sabah* reported that the Agence France-Presse correspondent in Cairo had stated that Salah Ben Youssef had issued a declaration appealing to the Tunisian people, urging them to oppose the agreement under negotiation between Tunisia and France. He issued the appeal in his capacity as secretary-general of the party. The Egyptian press published the appeal, and Egyptian radio broadcast it. The agency also learned that Ben Youssef would travel to Geneva and that the French consul in Cairo had refused to grant him the entry visa to Tunisia that he had requested, as the French consul in Geneva had previously done.⁴¹

The shock generated by this agreement divided the Tunisian public and political forces into two camps: supporters and opponents. Its supporters, led by Bourguiba, regarded it as an important step toward the country’s full independence. Its opponents, however, believed that the agreement had disappointed the aspirations of the Tunisian people, who sought complete independence, and that it had failed to guarantee Tunisia even the minimum degree of sovereignty. Foreign affairs

³⁶ Al-Soufi, previously cited work, 80.

³⁷ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 156.

³⁸ Amira Alia al-Saghir, *The Youssefists and the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb*, 2nd ed. (Tunis: al-Magharibia for Printing, Publishing, and Advertising, 2011), 18.

³⁹ Al-Turki, *The Youssefist Movement in Tunisia*, 211.

⁴⁰ Abdelbaki Brakni and Abdelwahab Chellali, “The Conflict between Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef and Its Repercussions for the Tunisian Political Situation, 1934–1956,” *Al-Risala Journal for Human Studies and Research* 4, no. 2 (June 2019): 84.

⁴¹ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 205–6.



and defense remained under French control, alongside other provisions that constrained Tunisia and the Tunisian people.⁴²

The agreement became known for dividing Tunisians and openly confirmed the division within the Neo Destour Party between the Francophile nationalist and Arab nationalist currents.⁴³ Following his return on June 1, 1955, Bourguiba declared: “I am delighted to return to my homeland after having participated in placing our relations with France on sound foundations, that is, based on free association by a people who understand that isolation in this world amounts to suicide.”⁴⁴

3. Salah Ben Youssef’s Return and the Zaytuna Address (October 1955): Reshaping the Revolution’s Base in Opposition to the Internal Autonomy Conventions

Salah Ben Youssef returned on September 13, 1955, and received a warm welcome from the citizens at the airport. Bourguiba was the first to shake his hand and delivered an address welcoming Ben Youssef, in which he described the conventions concluded with France as a step forward. When Salah Ben Youssef was invited to speak, he thanked Bourguiba, the people, and the party for the warm reception. He then addressed the conventions and declared that they constituted a step backward. This marked the moment when tensions erupted and the beginning of the open conflict between them.⁴⁵ On the one hand, many resistance fighters in the mountains responded to Bourguiba’s appeal and surrendered their weapons, each receiving ten dinars. When the division intensified, they rallied behind Bourguiba. Salah Ben Youssef’s appeal likewise resonated with many revolutionaries who refused to surrender their weapons or did so reluctantly. Each man thus acquired his own forces, particularly after Ben Youssef’s return, and each sought to mobilize the crowds around him.

Meetings were held in towns and villages until the balance shifted in Salah Ben Youssef’s favor following his historic address at the Zaytuna Mosque on October 7, 1955, in which he declared: “I greet you from this great mosque, from which the light of eternal Islam has shone and continues to shine. . . . I bring you a greeting from the depths of my heart, entrusted to me by your Arab and Muslim brethren in the East and the West . . . from Egypt to Libya, Syria, Baghdad, Afghanistan, Bandung, and Yathrib, the city of the greatest Messenger, upon whom be a thousand prayers and blessings.” He then noted that the conventions had failed to take into consideration the unity of the Arab Maghreb. He saluted the Algerian and Moroccan resistance fighters. He declared: “We express our support, encouragement, and solidarity with them because we believe that the freedom of Arab and Muslim North Africa is indivisible. . . . This convention has sanctioned the colonial order and acknowledged what even the Treaty of Bardo did not

⁴² Salem Haddad, *The Tunisian General Labor Union and the Bourguiba Regime: Between Concord and Confrontation*, vol. 1 (Tunis, 2011), 20.

⁴³ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 144.

⁴⁴ Brakni and Chellali, “The Conflict between Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef,” 83.

⁴⁵ Al-Chabbi, *Salah Ben Youssef*, 157.



acknowledge. . . Here, I state openly and on my own responsibility that, under this convention, Tunisia has become part of the French Union. Tunisians must continue the struggle to liberate themselves once and for all from the yoke of colonialism.”

This address provoked the resident-general, who submitted a strongly worded protest to Tahar Ben Ammar, regarding it as an infringement upon the spirit of the conventions between Tunisia and France and as an incitement of the popular masses to revolt against them.⁴⁶ Bourguiba likewise issued threats and warnings against anyone who sought to divide the party into two currents. Acting under the direction of the French authorities, Bourguiba, as party president, hastened to dismiss Salah Ben Youssef from the secretary-generalship, the Political Bureau, and the party itself. Salah Ben Youssef rejected the decision because a secretary-general could be removed only by a general party congress. The party thereby became two parties:

1. The General Secretariat of the Neo Destour Party, led by Salah Ben Youssef
2. The Political Bureau of the Neo Destour Party, led by Habib Bourguiba⁴⁷

The conflict thus made clear to all Ben Youssef’s position, which represented a Tunisia that belonged to the East and formed an integral part of the Arab Maghreb and the Arab and Islamic nation, in contrast to Bourguiba’s position, which represented a Tunisia that belonged to the West through association and solidarity with France and whose future lay in the “Free World” (*Le monde libre*).⁴⁸ Before the dispute escalated into armed conflict, several attempts were made to reconcile the two parties. Bourguiba initiated such efforts while Ben Youssef was abroad. These attempts were undertaken at various times by Jallouli Fares, Mongi Slim, and Bahi Ladgham, while an independent initiative by the trade unionist Habib Achour also failed. The Farmers’ Union undertook the most notable effort under the leadership of Habib Mouelhi. Its representatives traveled to France while Bourguiba was receiving medical treatment there. Bourguiba told Mouelhi: “You have come to me now, Si Habib, to persuade me of the necessity of meeting Salah Ben Youssef, but how can I do so? Do you think France will permit it, when it prevented me from meeting Messali Hadj?” When Mouelhi heard these words from Bourguiba, he unleashed his anger upon him and said: “So long as you obey France’s orders, stand where it wants you to stand, and move as it wishes you to move . . . Your words have caused you to lose all standing in my eyes.” During the Sfax Congress in November 1955, Libya and Egypt proposed mediation, but Bourguiba refused, stating that the Arab states should play only the role of observers.⁴⁹

The situation deteriorated, and the conflict became armed in the streets. Bourguiba formed militias composed of former resistance fighters who had surrendered their weapons. Known as

⁴⁶ Haddad, *The Tunisian General Labor Union and the Bourguiba Regime*, 27–28.

⁴⁷ Al-Taher Abdallah, previously cited source, 117–18.

⁴⁸ Alia al-Saghir, *The Youssefists and the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb*, 25.

⁴⁹ Al-Soufi, previously cited work, 150–56.



the “Vigilance Committees,” they were tasked with pursuing the Youssefists.⁵⁰ These committees began operations to eliminate Salah Ben Youssef’s cells. Jamal Qannan stated: “The Vigilance Committees killed twenty-seven of Salah Ben Youssef’s activists between Djerba and Ben Gardane, according to what a member of the General Secretariat in Djerba told us. This occurred around December 1955, when I sought to cross the Tunisian-Libyan border with the students whom Said Abdelhay had sent to the East for training. Groups of Bourguiba’s supporters stopped us and refused to escort us to the border because they had received orders not to cooperate with us.”⁵¹

On the other hand, there is no established evidence that the Youssefists initially used arms against their opponents. In this regard, Hammadi Ghars, a resistance fighter and supporter of Salah Ben Youssef, stated in testimony before the Truth and Dignity Commission: “I wish to establish something for the historical record: the Youssefist opposition was legitimate, peaceful, and spontaneous from September 1955 until January 28, 1956. We did not use weapons until after the Vigilance Committees' raids. Even after we became armed, we did not use weapons against the Political Bureau. I swear before you, now that I am over eighty years old: how could I use weapons against those with whom I had been imprisoned, with whom I had emigrated to Libya and Egypt, and with whom I had resisted France? However, Bourguiba allowed France to bomb us with aircraft for the first time during the period of independence, something it had not done even under the protectorate. Bourguiba gave France complete freedom to strike us.”⁵² Other testimonies presented in an Al Jazeera Documentary film, however, record some Youssefist resistance fighters as stating that both sides carried out the acts of elimination and that whenever one side isolated an opponent, it killed him.⁵³ France nevertheless singled out the Youssefists in the mountains, where major battles took place, either jointly with the Algerian Revolution, such as the Battle of Aïn Taher in 1956 alongside the army of Taleb Larbi, or independently, such as the Battle of Aqri in 1956. Many agree that these battles accelerated the achievement of independence on March 20, 1956.⁵⁴ The conflict ended with Salah Ben Youssef’s departure from the country on January 28, 1956. However, it tipped the balance in Bourguiba’s favor, enabling him, with French assistance, to eliminate the remaining supporters of Salah Ben Youssef.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict constitutes one of the most significant turning points in the history of the Tunisian nationalist movement during the struggle against French colonialism. It was characterized by a complex interaction among ideological, political, and organizational

⁵⁰ Alia al-Saghir, *The Youssefists and the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb*, 53.

⁵¹ Previously cited testimony of Jamal Qannan.

⁵² Video testimony of the resistance fighter Hammadi Ghars before Tunisia’s Truth and Dignity Commission, YouTube, accessed February 12, 2021.

⁵³ *Al-Fellaga 2*, historical documentary, Al Jazeera Documentary, YouTube, accessed October 20, 2020.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Alia al-Saghir, *The Youssefists and the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb*, 53–54.



factors within a changing international and regional context, marked by the rise of national liberation movements and the emergence of the Algerian Revolution as an influential force reshaping the balance of power in the Maghreb. The conflict produced two divergent conceptions of independence, which affected both the nature of Tunisian political decision-making and the management of the transitional period leading to independence. Transformations in the international arena, particularly the decline of French colonial influence, also contributed to accelerating developments and deepening divisions within the Neo Destour Party, thereby making the Tunisian question part of a broader Maghrebi and regional dynamic. Within this framework, national trajectories intersected with developments in the Algerian Revolution and other liberation movements in the region, giving the conflict a dimension that extended beyond its domestic boundaries. The situation also revealed a fundamental divergence among political actors concerning the future of the nation-state, both in their understanding of sovereignty and in their conception of relations with France. At the same time, it demonstrated the nationalist movement's ability to respond to international changes and recalibrate its strategies in accordance with the prevailing balance of power.

Based on the foregoing, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- An analysis of the Youssefist–Bourguibist conflict demonstrates that the dispute within the Tunisian nationalist movement was not merely a personal or organizational struggle but a profound disagreement concerning the nature of independence, the limits of sovereignty, and the strategy for confronting French colonialism.
- Bourguiba represented a pragmatic reformist current that relied on gradualism and negotiations with France to attain independence. In contrast, Salah Ben Youssef represented a radical current that rejected any form of incomplete independence and demanded full independence within a comprehensive Maghrebi and Arab vision.
- The outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in 1954 deepened this division by strengthening the Youssefists' commitment to armed struggle and accelerating negotiations between the Bourguibist wing and France.
- The conflict divided the Tunisian nationalist movement into two opposing camps, thereby affecting national unity during a critical phase of the struggle against colonialism.
- The triumph of the Bourguibist approach directed the path to independence toward a negotiated settlement with France, making the independence achieved in 1956 gradual and constrained by certain agreements.
- The events demonstrate that the Tunisian question was not isolated from its Maghrebi surroundings but was closely connected to developments in the Algerian Revolution and the liberation movements of the Maghreb.
- The conflict also demonstrates that divergent perspectives within nationalist movements may constitute a source of strength and diversity. However, it may also become a source



of division when consensus is lacking concerning the ultimate objective and the strategy for achieving it.

- The historical experience confirms the importance of understanding independence not as a momentary event but as a prolonged process in which internal, external, regional, and international factors intersect.