

12/4/56

M E M O R A N D U M

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Interviews With

Dr. Leon Benzaquen of Morocco and

Premier Bourguiba of Tunisia

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
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New York 16, N. Y.

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Last Tuesday, November 27th, I had a conference with Dr. Leon Benzaquen, now Minister of Communications in the Moroccan Cabinet, but slated soon to be Minister of Health.

Dr. Benzaquen was formerly one of the leading physicians in Morocco. When the Jewish community could not agree on a representative to be named to the Moroccan Cabinet, the Sultan sent for him and insisted on his accepting the appointment. According to him, this has been at considerable sacrifice on the Doctor's part.

I was very favorably impressed by Benzaquen. His basic philosophy, as he stated it to me, is identically the same as that of the AJC. He believes that the Jews of Morocco should be integrated into the life of that country; that they should have not only security but full equality as citizens, and that their rights should include the right to emigrate, provided that emigration is not induced by pressure or propaganda.

He assured me that the present political leaders of Morocco, including the Sultan and the Prince, wish to establish a constitutional, democratic regime. He is convinced that within twelve months a constitution will be adopted and an election held.

Already all restrictions on Jewish citizenship have been removed. Jews are no longer mere wards of the Sultan; they are citizens of Morocco.

In addition to his occupying the post of Minister in the Cabinet, the second ranking judge in the national judiciary system is a Jew and many other Jews occupy high places in the government.

While questions of personal status are still determined by religious courts, all other matters are being handled by secular tribunals.

On the subject of emigration he stated the right of individuals to emigrate was clearly recognized. The objection was to mass migration on an organized basis, stimulated by the Jewish Agency which was considered to be an arm of the Israeli government. He assured me that there would be no objection to an American agency (he mentioned the Joint in that connection) making its facilities available for prospective emigrants, helping them obtain visas, transportation, etc. -- all provided that there was no pressure or propaganda and, as he put it, there was nothing "spectacular" about the emigration.

The most dangerous aspect of the situation, in the view of Dr. Benzaquen, was the deplorable economic condition in Morocco, affecting Jews, Christians and Moslems alike. He expressed the hope that America would help them find a solution.

He then stated there was a possibility that Morocco and Tunisia might be in position to act as intermediaries in bringing about a settlement between the Middle East Arab countries and Israel. He stated that while they could not declare this in public, the fact was that the Moroccan leaders had no liking for Nasser or for any of the other dictators in the Middle East.

He thought it important that Israel refrain from doing anything

which would inflame the Arabs further. He expressed the hope that Eban in the UN would make further reference to the fact that Arabs and Jews are both Semites; that they should complement and not fight each other, and that Tunisia and Morocco are examples of collaboration and cooperation between the two groups.

I brought up the matter of Jewish institutions. He was positive in his declaration that these would be allowed to continue as before, serving Jewish persons and their children, with the sole exception that henceforth Arabic must be taught in all the Jewish schools. To this I told him we had no objection; on the contrary I said we favored it as part of the process of integration.

He was also confident that the Alliance Israelite would continue to receive its subvention.

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Today I was one of some 30 guests at a luncheon given for the Prince. There was no other representative of a national or international Jewish organization. I was seated next to Dr. Benzaquen and we continued our conversation along the same general lines.

I did not have an opportunity to talk at length with the Prince. However, from the remarks he made and the way he handled himself, he gave the impression of a young man (26 years old) of considerable ability and liberality of view.

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On December 3, John Slawson, Simon Segal and I had a conference with Premier Bourguiba, of Tunisia, in his suite at Essex House.

We had not met Mr. Bourguiba on our trip to North Africa in 1954, since he was at that time under house arrest in France. However, Zach Shuster and Abe Karlikow had established friendly contact with him, which has continued to this day.

The discussion at first had to do with general principles. I told him, briefly, of the American Jewish Committee philosophy and of our trip in 1954. I also stated that for a time ours was the only Jewish organization insisting that every effort should be made to continue the existence of the Jewish communities in North Africa, along with security and equality of rights for the Jews, such rights to include the right of emigration.

As Jews, I said, we appreciated his leadership in endeavoring to establish a democratic regime in Tunisia, in which all citizens would have equality of rights; as Americans, we were in great sympathy with his attempt to create a modern state, associated with the free world. We realized the enormous difficulties with which he was faced, both political and economic, and expressed the hope that he would be able to surmount those difficulties.

The Premier replied that he was in full sympathy with our principles and that it was his hope to create a condition in Tunisia in which there would be no distinction between Moslem, Christian, and Jew, and in which each would have full religious freedom, coupled with full equality of citizenship.

He mentioned the fact that Andre Baruch, now a member of his

Cabinet, had been his comrade in the struggle for Tunisian independence and that, in fact, at various times they had occupied cells in the same jail. He also mentioned other Jews who hold important positions in his government.

He said that, while questions of personal status are still being handled by religious courts, secular courts are being established to handle other issues. I was not too clear about this but gathered the impression that, even as to matters of personal status, each resident would be given a choice of submitting to the court of his religion or to the secular court.

We then turned to the following specific items:

1. Middle East crisis. Recent events, I stated, had been a source of concern to the Jewish community in Tunisia, since it was feared that irresponsible elements might take advantage of the situation to start an agitation against the Jews. It was a source of great satisfaction to us that the Tunisian leaders had recognized the danger and had distinguished between Tunisian Jews and Israelis. The Premier indicated that this distinction clearly existed in his mind and that that would continue to be the case.

2. Integration of Jewish communal institutions. We stated that we had no objection to, but on the contrary, approved of, the requirement that all schools in Tunisia, including Jewish schools, should teach the Arabic language. We felt that, as part of the process of integration, every Jew living in Tunisia should be able to speak the predominant tongue of that country.

We were disturbed, however, at some expressions in Tunisia, indicating a desire to compel Jewish institutions to accept non-Jews as beneficiaries. We told him that our concept of democracy included the right of each group to maintain such independent institutions as it desired. He expressed agreement with these views and indicated that, so far as he was concerned, he would favor continued independence of the Jewish institutions.

3. Emigration. I repeated that the rights for which we fought included the right of each individual to emigrate from the country in which he happened to be, if he desired to do so. We had heard that this right was still recognized in Tunisia on an individual basis but that just recently steps had been taken to discontinue group emigration. Mr. Bourguiba had not heard of any such development and assured us that this was contrary to his thinking.

In conclusion, we turned once more to the vast problems confronting his regime, in particular the economic difficulties which affect Arabs and Jews alike. We indicated our realization that French aid to the present Moroccan Government, already inadequate, would probably be further reduced, and perhaps eliminated altogether, in the near future. We also stated that, as Americans, we felt that the continuance of a liberal democratic regime in Tunisia was a matter of great concern to America and should be given high priority in the making of American foreign policy. To the extent that we could do so, within the limits of our duties and responsibilities, we would

be glad to help bring this about.

At the conclusion of the interview, Mr. Bourguiba mentioned the serious situation in Algeria and indicated that the disturbance there affected the entire North African scene.

The Premier expressed his appreciation of the views we had expressed and the conference ended on that note.

I. M. E.

Dated: December 4, 1956