

Review of *A History of Modern Tunisia*. By Kenneth J. Perkins.  
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Kenneth James Perkins is an American historian, specialist of the Middle East and currently an Emeritus Professor at the History Department at the University of South Carolina, but also held scholarships in the Islamic Departments of Princeton and McGill University, as well as the Institute of African and Asian Studies at the University of Khartoum.

The primary focus of his work lies in the Magreb during the colonial period and early books like *Tunisia: Crossroads of the Islamic and European Worlds* (1986) and his two editions of the *Historical Dictionary of Tunisia* (1989/97) have set standards for further academic research. His frequent travels to North Africa and the Middle East and his extensive research make Perkins a reliable expert to the field and well quoted source of scholarly reference.

In his latest publication *A History of Modern Tunisia* (2014), an update of an earlier work with the same title published in 2004 and triggered by the recent events that swept the Arab world, Perkins attempts to incorporate the Tunisian part of the 'Arab Spring' into the country's historical narrative. As a historical assessment, the book is a timely contribution and follows suit to similar publications on the national history of other Arab Spring countries, as was the case with Egypt, Libya and Syria.<sup>2</sup> The logical placement of Perkins's and other's work is clearly linked to the events of 2011 and follow the historical profession's reaction in scientific journals and more encompassing works dealing exclusively with the Arab Revolutions; right after the media coverage and the publication of general surveys by journalists, political advisors and experts on the region began to fade. The choice of the publishing date for this update on Tunisia's national history is critical and, of course, can be subject to debate. As the book finishes with the events in autumn 2013, the reader will miss a comprehensive assertion of the country's transition period, however, the paradigm change of the revolution has been analysed in detail. After all, the internal dynamics are still far

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<sup>1</sup> For this review the eBook Kindle file has been used as reference.

<sup>2</sup> Among others:

Amin, Galal. *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak 1981–2011*. Kairo/New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011.  
Cook, Steven A. *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.  
Lesch, David W. *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*. Totton: Yale University Press, 2013.  
Vandewalle, Dirk. *A History of Modern Libya*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

from completed and a denied access to the study of long term effects should not prohibit early assessments that take into account the developed historical background of the (revolutionary) society in question.

The introduction part to the second edition is worth mentioning, as the author contrasts it sharply with the opening words of the first edition and uses it to masterfully place his work within the changing historiographical paradigm. The tour-guide journey through Tunis, which Perkins takes the reader on, now traces down the signs of the revolution three years ago, while the 2004 publication emphasised on the capitals cultural and historical richness. The sharp contrast is intentional and successfully illustrates the changes that the academic scholarship on Tunisia has undergone since 2011. While the 2004 railway ride on the TGM sounds like a mix between a tour guide (which Perkins has worked as) and a historical advertisement for the country's past (maybe to encourage neglected historical scholarship on the country), the one three years after the revolution examines the marks of the event that once again have placed Tunisia in the limelight of global attention and academic research.

Even if its political 'blandness' (loc. 275) has left space for a handful of scholars working on one of the world's most overlooked countries under the premises of social, political and economic sciences, Tunisia's image throughout the second half of the 20th century has been one of stability, thus primarily attracting European tourists. The rupture with this tendency has, as Perkins asserts, however, deep roots within the country's national history (loc. 280). One might rightly expect the author to excavate these roots, however, Perkins aims to go beyond a teleological re-writing of the modern Tunisian history in order to explain the revolution, but tries to incorporate the most recent events in established historical narratives in order to show breaks and continuities with long-term historical developments.

Naturally, Perkins builds on the central narratives he had established in the previous edition and he skilfully incorporates the updated analysis in his search for the answers of four lead questions: (1) The political relation between ruler and ruled, (2) the relation between progress and cultural identity, (3) the basic conditions of economic development and (4) the formulation of an artistic tradition as a reflection of these processes (loc. 468).

The first theme ploughs its path through the seven chapters of the book and consequently merges into number eight on the revolution. The phrasing of an 'accommodation' rather than a 'cooperation' between the ruler and the ruled suggests a remarkable absence of democratic notions within the Tunisian political sphere, a topic which the author elaborates extensively on, as it consists of one of the paradigms that had to be reevaluated in the course of 2011. In the last chapters

of the first edition, which deals with President Ben Ali's redefinition of the Tunisian society, it was suggested that the accommodation process had found it an acceptable *status quo* of economic prosperity at the price of political stagnation after the country's emergence from the colonial period, the abolishment of the beylical dynasty, the national independence movements and Bourguiba's presidential monarchy. Naturally, the search for democratic components within the Tunisian society have been intensified since 2011, and, as Perkins illustrates, results show that the revolution — although unpredicted — grew in a partly liberal political and social environment (loc. 4248).

The second narrative, the establishment of a functioning relation between progress and cultural identity, perhaps most explicitly points to the current development in Tunisia, especially with regard to the country's Islamic heritage. With al-Nahda's decisive victory in Tunisia's first democratic elections in October 2011, analysts find explanations in a deeply rooted cultural-religious identity (loc. 5125). Perkins situates the beginnings of the tensions between modernisation and cultural heritage at the end of the 19th century, when a handful of Western-educated 'Young Tunisians' came to the conclusion that the French colonial rule will most likely continue to benefit the French and not the Tunisians, and that the most efficient tool to alter the *status quo* of the protectorate would be to bring the country to equal levels with the colonisers in terms of political, economic and social development. That opposing trends, who emphasised more traditional values, formed as a reaction to the apparent loss of cultural identity seems natural and they remained influential in the decades to come. When Bourguiba, however, opted for the former model (i.e. Westernisation), the cultural-Islamic mark disappeared, at least from the public sphere. Meanwhile, the 'Tunisian model of decolonisation' enjoyed the perks of women's emancipation and an unprecedented investment into its education system. Consequently, Ben Ali, at least in this matter, seemed to enjoy unified support in the suppression of Islamic elements, especially when they ventured into the political sphere; by the last quarter of the 20th century a discourse that was more and more reduced to radical Islamism, terrorism and the pending nightmare of an Islamic Republic or a civil war of the Algerian model. When the Islamists reappeared in the popular wake of 2011 and swept the first democratic elections, the country's apparent secular identity had to be re-evaluated (loc. 4250).

The third encompassing theme, the basic conditions of economic development, somehow witnesses an opposing trend to the first two narratives. Perkins elaborates extensively on the bey's opportunistic and seemingly naive sell-out of the country, which drove Tunisia into European dependency, as well as on the conditions of economic hardship under the French colonial rule, whose predatory policies primarily favoured the *colons* and other foreign residents and reduced Tunisians to second class citizens in their own country. The asymmetrical economic opportunities

(along with other political and social factors) then is seen as one of the driving forces of the national movements such as the *Dustur* party, whose aim was to redefine the relation with France and the protectorate authorities. When independence was achieved in 1956, things seemed to fall into place. After the initial setback of the socialist experiment, Bourguiba's government highly profited from its close connection with the West, especially in the economic sphere. Under the rule of Ben Ali, the country's economic prosperity, highly due to the growing tourism industry, was at its peak and seemed to serve as valid excuse for political and social stagnation as Tunisians were better off than most of their African and Arab neighbours. The popular uprisings and the political liberation process of 2011 have not only revealed that image of an all-encompassing economic prosperity was an artificial one — the predatory practices of the presidential clan set aside, but, contrary to the raised expectations, also meant an actual decline in the living standard of a large segment of the population whose income was dependent on the tourist sector. Up to date, the economic questions remain the most pressing ones to be addressed by the new government (loc. 5087).

The fourth and last central question of Perkins analysis is the formulation of an artistic tradition as a reflection of the processes outlined above. Here the analysis becomes more detailed in the later chapters and there is remarkably little on the artistic scene before the formation of a European-influenced subculture in the second quarter of the 20th century, which is then usually incorporated in the evaluation of the anti-colonial movements. One of the main critics of the book's first edition was the relatively late offset of the analysis of Tunisia's cultural sphere. An exclusive section in the sixth chapter on the arts and literature under Bourguiba (loc. 3556-3716.) and elaborate cultural references on the Ben Ali era suggest that once the first three aspects of development mentioned earlier have been fulfilled, there was space for the formation of an artistic scene in the country.<sup>3</sup> That this shortcoming persists in the new edition is underlined by the fact that, although the zoom on the political developments gets much more detailed as the reader approaches the year 2011, the vivid cultural scene of the revolution is widely neglected.

As a relatively recent publication, the new edition has evoked little critical reaction, however, as it has to be considered as an update rather than a rewriting of the old version, much of the feedback received for the first edition in 2004 is still valid, at least as far as the first seven chapters are concerned. Most critics have pointed to the fact that a relatively small amount of the analysis is devoted to post-independent Tunisia (about one-third), arguably because the author found that a

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<sup>3</sup> See Jefferson, John. Rev. of *A History of Modern Tunisia*. by Kenneth J. Perkins. *DMES*. Vol. 15, No. 1 (2006): 86-89, here 89.

vast scholarship on this period was already available.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the aspect is missing for the reader who is looking for a more comprehensive overview on the country's modern history. Indeed, some parts that would otherwise be deemed important are overlooked as a results of the books ambitious goal of analysing almost two centuries in a couple of hundred pages.<sup>5</sup>

A further issue was Perkins shortcoming to critically reflect on the regime of Ben Ali, certainly due to the restrictions of non-Tunisian scholars visiting and working in the country during that area.<sup>6</sup> However, the author apparently was well aware of this defect and dedicated an entire section of the last chapter in the new edition to a critical evaluation of the fallen regime (*Assessing Ben Ali*, loc. 4604-4683).

In the chapter on revolution (*A Revolution for Dignity, Freedom and Justice*, loc. 4248) — although it is skilfully connected to the four central narratives — the focus on the chronology of the events is somewhat more evident than in the other chapters, where a more thematic approach dominates. Perkins, however, gives careful evaluations on the immediate conditions of the revolution, its course, and a temporary assessment of the transition period, as well as the much debated electoral process for the Constitutional Assembly in October 2011 (loc. 4931). For the evaluation of the dynamics beyond the country's borders, however, the reader has to look elsewhere.

Another point to be addressed is the authors relatively shallow positioning of his own work within the broader scholarly community. Although Perkins makes good use of primary sources and gives occasional reference to other works, the reader struggles to find an evaluation of different academic positions on the topic, as this aspect has been compromised for the book's overview and introduction character. Indeed, the authors main aim is to give the interested reader access to the main narratives of the country's history, not to analyse the academic debates and historiographical landscape of his subject; thus leaving little contact surface for an encampment in the different schools of thought dealing with the history of the country.

Kenneth J. Perkins, however, provides a valuable and easy-to-read account of Tunisia's modern history, analyses its central narratives, incorporates the most recent developments of the Tunisian Revolution and the transition period into these dominating themes, and shows continuities and ruptures along the lines. Students of Tunisia's national history (as well as the different Arab Spring

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<sup>4</sup> See Zoubir, Yahia H. Rev. of *A History of Modern Tunisia*. by Kenneth J. Perkins. *MESA Bulletin*. Vol. 42, No. 1 (2008): 193-195, here 195.

<sup>5</sup> See Abdelkrim, Belkheiri. Rev. of *A History of Modern Tunisia*. by Kenneth J. Perkins. *History*. Vol. 91, No. 303 (2006): 433-434, here 433.

<sup>6</sup> See Zoubir 2008: 195.

movements) will find this work indispensable as a first assessment of the field as its kind still enjoys little company in the academic landscape, especially in the English language. Aimed at undergraduate students, however, advanced researchers and scholars on the field will have to look elsewhere for a more in-depth analysis on the different themes; a task that a comprehensive and commented 'Suggestions for Further Reading' section at the end of the book might be useful for (loc. 5820). For the reader who is new to the topic, *A History of Modern Tunisia* gives an excellent overview on the country's developments during the last 180 years, introduces its key personalities and main political, economic and social issues, and in turn places them into the broader historical narratives.

By Nils E. Lukacs