1 Introduction

> Abdelmalek Sayad used to speak of the 'double absence' of migrants in the political imagination of the country of origin and the host country. We wanted to lift a veil of contempt and ignorance on the double social and political presence of Tunisian immigrants-emigrants in France and Tunisia.
>
> (Ben Hiba, in Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des deux Rives 2014, 3)

With these words Tarek Ben Hiba, a major figure of Tunisian activism in France, opened a retrospective of forty years of mobilisation by a leading Tunisian leftist association in France of which he was then president. The statement acknowledges Abdelmalek Sayad, an Algerian sociologist who pioneered the concept of immigration being a 'double absence'. This reverse idea of 'double presence' between the two shores of the Mediterranean that Tarek Ben Hiba was writing about is far from being a euphemism. Ben Hiba embodied this himself, and on his death in June 2022 he left behind an impressive political heritage that numerous actors quickly sought to pass on to future generations.

First active within one of the main leftist groups in Tunisia, el-'Amel el-Tounsi, in the 1970s and in trade union activities, Ben Hiba came to France in 1988 and was thereafter at the forefront of all struggles against discrimination, racism and Islamophobia. He supported the rights of undocumented migrants, citizenship for all, and the rights of Palestinians. Elected as a regional counsellor in the Paris region from 2004 to 2010, he also continued to participate in the fight against dictatorships in the Maghreb, and particularly in Tunisia. From France, he contributed to the organisation of many demonstrations, wrote communiqués against repression and took part in original alliances gathering Islamists and leftists to oppose the Tunisian regime.

When in December 2010 street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated to protest against police harassment in a small town in central Tunisia called Sidi Bouzid, which was followed by weeks of mass protests initiating the misnamed 'Arab Spring', Ben Hiba engaged from France in

the Collective of Solidarity with the Struggles of Sidi Bouzid Residents to support the ongoing revolution. As thousands of Tunisians took to the streets in Paris, often for the first time, many had the opportunity to discover Ben Hiba's words as he addressed the crowds. A couple of months later, following the overthrow of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali's twenty-three-year rule, he was a member of the High Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution of Political Reforms and Democratic Transition. While the High Authority was in charge of organising 'the transition from revolution to elections' of the Constituent National Assembly (Lieckefett 2012, 133), Ben Hiba represented the category of 'Tunisians abroad'.

Yet Ben Hiba's words seem entirely accurate when he evoked 'the veil of contempt and ignorance' over this 'double presence' of many actors. Tunisian migrants in France found themselves struggling to secure a legitimate position in an increasingly securitised and hostile environment. Often described in the public sphere as a homogeneous entity, and frequently dehumanised, these migrants are seldom considered as political actors with any sense of agency. On the other side of the Mediterranean, in a context in which binationals are far too often discredited and suspected of not really being Tunisian, the relocation of Tunisian politics abroad that took place over decades does not seem to be a part of Tunisian collective history or memory. This twofold invisibilisation of political mobilisation in exile stands in stark contrast to the ever-growing scholarship on political transnationalism and exile politics in the social science literature. This rather unsettling paradox is what laid the ground for this research. This book seeks to explain how Tunisia's politics and history can only be understood by taking into account its history of long-distance activism. Prior to the 2011 Revolution, an understudied and yet central aspect of post-independence Tunisian politics was the way in which both pro-regime and oppositional activism played out across borders – particularly in France, where the majority of exile groups took refuge and were spurred to action.

This book rests on two guiding questions: What were the conditions that enabled long-distance Tunisian politics? How do we explain what it meant to oppose or support an authoritarian regime from afar in terms of reconfiguring this activism in a migratory context? To answer these questions, this book will explore the creation and dynamics of what I conceptualise as the 'trans-state space of mobilisation' by looking at the main actors who worked to produce this space: the oppositional milieu that was made up of Tunisian Islamists and leftists, as well as networks of support and stakeholders within the Tunisian authoritarian party-state. The book also analyses the way this space came to be

structured and the conflicts that were involved as pro- and anti-regime homeland politics aspired to inform and influence power from afar. It also draws particular attention to the constraints and possibilities involved in long-distance activism. From the perspective of political sociology, this book thus explores the evolution of political action that took place when Tunisian activists crossed national borders and started, continued or reconfigured homeland struggles from abroad, thereby challenging but also reinforcing the boundaries of Tunisian politics.

Before beginning an in-depth exploration of long-distance Tunisian activism, I will first discuss the choice to examine the Tunisian case in France and situate the study in the broader political, economic and migratory relationships between Tunisia and France. The second section of this introduction will present the theoretical framework underlying that universe of political practice, located at the intersection of scholarship on North African politics, social movements and diaspora politics, and will clarify this study's contributions to those different strands of the literature. The third section will outline the issues involved in doing fieldwork after the 2011 Revolution and introduce the material on which this book draws – namely sixty-eight semi-structured interviews with active members of a wide range of exile groups, including Islamists, leftists and elites within the Tunisian and French regimes, numerous informal discussions and observations as well as archival work.

The Choice of Tunisian Politics in France

Why choose France for understanding long-distance Tunisian activism? Fundamentally because France and Tunisia are bound by colonial, migration and mobilisation histories. The density and diversity of the Tunisian communities made France – Paris in particular – a unique breeding ground for activism and a particularly rich site for research. The long-term and diverse Tunisian political action that took place in France allows us to follow its variations and understand its complexities from afar. Yet, until the 2011 Revolution Tunisia was much too often envisaged as an 'exceptional' and 'quiet' country (Dakhlia 2011) where social and political contestations were not worthy of interest. This 'myth of Tunisian exceptionalism' (Camau 2018) was in itself a discourse of power useful to legitimate the policies of Habib Bourguiba – the first president of post-independence Tunisia (1957–1987) – and later his successor Ben Ali (1987–2011). This was particularly the case for European partners for whom Tunisia was seen as a miracle in the so-called Arab world, particularly in terms of women's emancipation, religion and education (Marzouki and Meddeb 2016). But this 'myth' also had an influence on

the production of knowledge. This problematic discourse on the 'exceptionality of Tunisia' fuelled a lack of scholarly interest in the contestation of political order and was reinforced in the context of Ben Ali's neoliberal Tunisia. The country was then also considered a model of economic stability and performance, a 'good student' of the international organisations because of its supposed reformist character (Hibou 2009) – and was therefore seen as unshakable by Western powers.[1]

The 2011 Revolution changed the dynamics. Pioneering works on Tunisian opposition politics (Khiari 2003; Ayari 2016) and the political economy of repression in Tunisia (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006) have been complemented by recent studies concentrating on the revolutionary processes that followed the fall of Ben Ali (Hmed 2016; Allal and Geisser 2018; Yousfi 2019). These stimulating works on post-independence Tunisian history and politics have mainly focussed on national events, and little attention has been paid to what has happened outside the nation's boundaries, although political actions have often started there and their study can shed much light on any number of national issues. There is therefore a risk of romanticising the sudden post-2011 political awakening of essentialised Tunisian diasporas. By documenting and analysing the way Tunisian politics has played out across borders, this study of Tunisian activism in France under Ben Ali's authoritarian rule aspires to fill this gap while avoiding the attendant risks that such an approach may involve.

The dynamics of long-distance Tunisian activism described here emerged from the history of colonisation and, relatedly, from the history of post-colonial immigration. To understand Tunisian activism in France, it is first necessary to offer as a backdrop a quick overview of Tunisian emigration and immigration, and the diplomatic issues this entailed between France and Tunisia. Both countries played a role in emigration dynamics. Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's authoritarian regimes institutionalised 'the Tunisian paradigm of migration' as a cornerstone of political order in post-colonial Tunisia (Dini and Giusa 2021, 26), whilst the importation of Tunisian labourers was also central to France's policies. If Tunisian politics in France draws on earlier labour migratory configurations, we will also discover that this entanglement is only partial.

The Context of Tunisian Emigration and Immigration

France plays host to the single largest community of Tunisians outside Tunisia itself. While we know that the size and composition of the

[1] For a problematic discourse on the 'exceptionality of Tunisia' that significantly continued after the 2011 Revolution, see, for instance, Masri (2017).

community has changed over the last several decades, it is difficult to estimate the exact number and social features of Tunisians living in the country. Due to a profound historical mistrust towards consulates – consulates were often considered as an unofficial body of control from afar by Tunisian regimes – many binationals chose not to register as such, and it was also impossible to keep a record of so-called irregular immigrants. To get a broad idea of numbers, however, in 1986, the year before Ben Ali's ascent to power, the Tunisian population in France was estimated by the French authorities at 230,000.[2] In 2012, a year after the 2011 Revolution, the Office des Tunisiens à l'Étranger (OTE) suggested there may have been 721,397 Tunisians in France, representing 54.4 per cent of Tunisians resident abroad, out of a total population of fewer than eleven million.[3] Unlike Algerian emigration to France – the oldest, most numerous and most intense emigration, which was historically mainly rural (Gillette and Sayad 1984) – Tunisian emigration was both rural and urban. Monographs on different communities of Tunisians in Belleville or in Barbès (Boubakri 1985; Tlili 1989; Simon and Tapia 1998; Karamti 2007), both important areas of Tunisian immigration in Paris, as well as on various communities of Tunisians in the Alpes-Maritimes (Yousfi 2013), depict this demographic and socio-economic diversity. The main Tunisian regions of departure were the agglomeration of Tunis, as well as the south-east and north-west regions of the country. In terms of a preferred destination, Paris was and remains particularly favoured, followed by the Côte d'Azur (Marseille) and Rhône Alpes (Lyon) regions (Simon 1979).

The fact that France, and Paris in particular, is the main destination in Europe for Tunisian emigrants can be traced back several decades. French colonisation of Tunisia from 1881 to 1956 did not lead to large-scale emigration to metropolitan France, unlike it did with Morocco and Algeria. Tunisian emigration to Europe in general, and to France in particular, began with the First World War when colonial France requested North African labourers to replace French labourers who had to fight on the battlefield. However, it concerned rather weak numbers, and many Tunisians went back home once the war was over, unlike Moroccans and Algerians, most of whom stayed in metropolitan France. Until independence in 1956, most Tunisian emigration was oriented towards Algeria and Egypt, and Tunisia was more of an immigration country than an emigration country. Migration

[2] FNA-P 19920417, 'La communauté Tunisienne en France', 31 August 1988.
[3] 'Les Tunisiens résidents à l'étranger, chiffres et statistiques de l'OTE'. *Tunisiens de France*, 27 December 2015.

movements to Europe, later to Libya and the Gulf, became particularly salient with the end of colonial rule.

While Tunisia's newly independent government was at first rather reluctant to encourage emigration, with a fear of losing a highly needed skilled and qualified workforce, the context of rising unemployment in Tunisia, coupled with a demand for disposable and cheap labourers to reconstruct post-war France, changed the dynamics. In line with the developmentalist approach of Bourguiba in the 1960s and 1970s, in a context in which political and economic structures were unable to create enough employment opportunities, migration was a 'safety valve that tends to ease social tensions and ward off collective mobilisation against the regime' (Meddeb 2012, 396). It became a more systematised public policy and a cornerstone of co-operation between Tunisia and France. Tunisia was one of the first signatories of the labour convention in August 1963 that established the regulatory framework for Tunisian immigration to France for some years. Migration policies were part of Tunisia's pro-active strategy to relieve pressure on the domestic employment market, as shown by the different development plans analysed by Laurie Brand (2006). After the abandoning in 1969 of the socialist experience of co-operatives that had started at the beginning of the 1960s, Tunisia entered a phase of economic liberalism. In this context, migration was particularly encouraged and continued to be institutionalised as part of the country's employment policies. Hamza Meddeb shows how much 'like the export of phosphate, olive oil or agricultural products, the strategy of exporting labour was a means of integrating Tunisia into the world economy in this phase of liberalisation of the economy' (Meddeb 2012, 405). Migration to France thus grew further in the 1960s and early 1970s as bilateral agreements between the two countries and recruitment policies were put in place.

The process changed with the very first attempts at restricting immigration, in terms of regularisation and length of stay, at the very beginning of the 1970s, and in particular from 1973 when France, like its European neighbours, tightened immigration policies, halted recruitment and closed its doors to foreign labour. In July 1974, the provisory suspension of the introduction of workers was enacted by the French government led by Jacques Chirac, who justified this measure as a way to deal with a current economic crisis. Tunisians continued to emigrate, however, through other patterns of migration and via other channels, including family reunification, irregular entry and extended stay (Natter 2014). While the previous phase of emigration was mainly composed of male workers, the family reunification programmes of the 1970s changed the composition of Tunisian communities in France. In the 1980s, and

more especially from 1985 with the Schengen Agreements, numerous EU countries imposed increasing restrictions on immigration, notably through the introduction of visa requirements. Here again, those repressive policies did not stop Tunisians from migrating to France; however, it rendered them more vulnerable by consolidating legal and institutional processes which tended to illegalise their mere presence.

When Ben Ali, former Minister of the Interior and Prime Minister under President Bourguiba, triggered the coup of 7 November 1987 that marked the end of Bourguiba's era, Tunisia witnessed a temporary political liberalisation and reforms were implemented to respect human rights and the rule of law. After a couple of years, this quickly began to unravel and rampant authoritarianism was coupled with increasingly neoliberal modes of government (Hibou 2006), moving away from Bourguiba's first years of statism. From the 1990s, while Ben Ali's Tunisia was considered a miracle of economic stability, its migration policies were also most welcomed by European countries, and France in particular: the security inflection on the fight against and criminalisation of so-called illegal immigration, as well as the surveillance of departures, helped to construct the image of Tunisia as the watchdog of Europe's southern borders. Through numerous bilateral agreements, Tunisia was called to play a central role in the increased outsourcing of the management of migratory movements, 'enacting the role of the Maghreb as a "migratory security zone" between Africa and Europe' (Dini and Giusa 2021, 26).

Who Becomes a Long-Distance Tunisian Activist?

Long-distance Tunisian activism is thus rooted in the migration history and politics linking Tunisia to France. While knowing and keeping in mind that the general context of migration is therefore truly essential to understanding further the dynamics of long-distance Tunisian activism, the latter cannot be reduced to Tunisian labour emigration and immigration. It is also rooted in a history of activism that relates as much to Tunisian social movements as it does to French social movements. The choice of Tunisian politics in France thus also stems from the fact that France is where Tunisian activism is most developed outside Tunisia itself. And it would be hard to understand or explain this fact without bearing in mind Tunisia's unique status as a former French colony and without repositioning the struggles of Tunisians in the longer historical relationship between the two countries.

Paul Silverstein (2004, 242) remarked the following of Algeria: 'In yet another postcolonial irony, one could argue that France has become a

primary site for conducting Algerian politics'. The same could be said of Tunisia; there exists a long history of struggle that was often kick-started by Tunisian activists based in France. This was the case even before the country's independence in 1956, as France was an important hotspot for pursuing the anti-colonial struggle (Aissaoui 2009). As France's colonial power controlled the political activities of its opponents, it was paradoxically in France, most particularly in Paris, that Tunisian activists managed to operate against colonial rule more freely. From the interwar period onwards, Tunisian activism in France became conflated with the student movement, which 'became a school of political training and broadcasting the national consciousness' (Dhifallah 2004, 313–14). Interwar Paris in particular was an 'anti-imperial metropolis' and a 'vantage point' from which many encounters were enabled with Third World nationalists who 'dreamed up a post-imperial world order' (Goebel 2015, 3). In this respect, the Association des Étudiants Musulmans Nord Africains (AEMNA), which was created in Paris in 1927, played a crucial role. The AEMNA was a kind of laboratory in which nationalist leaders and their modes of struggles were tested and developed (Ageron 2005). The premises of AEMNA, a university restaurant at 115 boulevard Saint-Michel in the centre of Paris, became a central gathering point for North African student movements and one of the most important spaces of socialisation in the history of immigration in Paris.

Many future elites of the nationalist movements, from the Tunisian Destour Party (the first Tunisian nationalist political party, the liberal constitutional party founded in 1920) and from the Néo-Destour Party (founded in 1934, following the split with the Destour), were formed in that Parisian context (Liauzu 1982, 2009). Habib Bourguiba was one of its founding members and prominent figures, and the group led the fight for independence against the French before becoming Tunisia's only party under Bourguiba's regime, under the name Parti Socialiste Destourien (PSD), and under Ben Ali's regime (in 1988), as the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD). Central to the fight against colonialism was also the Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie (UGET), and UGET's founding congress, which was organised mainly by members of the Néo-Destour Party, was held in July 1953 in Paris on the premises of AEMNA.

Following Tunisia's independence, and once Bourguiba was in power, long-distance Tunisian politics intensified. As the aim was no longer to fight the colonial power but to fight or oppose his regime, France was deliberately chosen as a site of action. Other factors should be considered alongside the existence of privileged links based on the colonial history binding Tunisia and France, such as geographical proximity, the

commonality of the French language, familial links that were forged for a large number of activists due to labour migration policies in the 1960s, and host-state policies. For instance, the Groupe d'Études et d'Action Socialistes en Tunisie (GEAST) – better known as Perspectives, from the title of its publication *Perspectives Tunisiennes pour une vie meilleure* – was created in Paris in 1963. It emerged from the student milieu of the French capital and quickly became the main leftist opposition movement to Bourguiba's regime. For the reader interested in more background, Chapter 2 will clarify the genealogy of the different groups active at this period fighting against or supporting Bourguiba's regime. The richness of long-term Tunisian politics in France has also to do with the fact that Tunisian leftists took part in other struggles, linked as much to the support of the Palestinian cause as to the defence of the social and economic conditions of immigrants in France and to anti-racism. The Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA), a Maoist-inspired and anti-Zionist organisation, one of the most important autonomous organisations amongst first-generation North African migrant activists, is a good example of this fact (Aissaoui 2009; Hajjat 2022). Many Tunisians, along with other North African students and workers, were involved in the 'Palestine committees' created in 1971 and replaced by the MTA in 1972. Under Ben Ali's rule, intensification of the Tunisian regime's repression, the growing number of exiles, the diversification of ideological groupings, and the new modes of action that this entailed all combined to make it a particularly rich period to study.

Various categories of people were invested in long-distance Tunisian politics, but they sometimes lived a different social reality from the majority of Tunisian migrants in France. In other words, Tunisian activists in France represent a numerical minority and a minority in terms of their social profiles. They were sometimes disconnected from the broader Tunisian post-colonial wave of immigration of the 1960s and 1970s, which was mainly composed of labourers – although we will see that this was less the case for leftist movements in France, which at times operated as a point of juncture.

In fact, this issue should be placed in a broader theoretical debate on categories and categorisations. Disregarding the multiple experiences of immigrants 'pushes into the background the tensions among different experiences of migration and mobility, and obscures the racial, gendered and class articulations of such experiences' (Sajed 2013, 49). In that respect, Abdelmalek Sayad's distinction between 'ordinary emigrants' and 'work emigrants', whose migratory projects and social trajectories before and during emigration differ from those of 'political emigrants' (Sayad 1999, 192–94), is useful. In the context that Sayad

wrote about – which was colonisation – he also reminds us that emigration is by definition political in this context, and that 'political émigrés' are in fact also 'work émigrés'. However, this distinction runs the risk of reproducing naturalised categories of migration apparatus (Dahinden 2016). Terminology is never neutral, especially when it describes migration, and it often reflects the categories of 'state thought' (Sayad 1999). Terms such as 'exile', 'migration' and 'asylum' have socio-political attributes that reflect diverging interests, and the Tunisian example is no exception. Whom can we then consider to be a long-distance Tunisian activist, and what categories best describe them?

I begin by differentiating between the process of migration itself and the post-migration political experience in order to concentrate attention upon the political activity abroad. This perspective diverges from the dominant binary that structures the way migration is understood according to policies and frameworks that are put in place to govern it, which sets up a conceptual dichotomy between those who are forced into exile (political migrants) and those who supposedly emigrate by choice (economic migrants). This division – according to reasons for or causes of migration – is of course simplistic, and does not account for changes and evolution, such as new political belongings or processes of disengagement from fields of action. It also disregards the fact that reasons for migration are often mixed, linked and complex (Akoka 2020; Hamlin 2021). In this study, I strive to avoid the categorisation of Tunisian political activists according to fixed headings based on their reasons for departure (political or economic, voluntary or involuntary) but concentrate instead on their proximity to political organisations in France and on their political preferences and practices.

I consider this a vital approach, particularly because long-distance Tunisian activism includes actors whose origins can be traced back to different migratory trajectories or whose migration does not necessarily stem from political pressure. Some came to France to study and only started their political engagement against Tunisia's authoritarian regime once they had arrived and settled. Others were forced into exile from Tunisia as dissidents and found themselves politically neutralised by their exile to France. Political commitment is therefore not necessarily associated with modes of migration, and political activism in exile is not inherently linked to legal status (Dufoix 2000). Legal status may be an important factor that influences possibilities for activism, but it is only one of many factors when it comes to analysing politics from afar. I therefore consider the politicisation of migrant activists as a separate issue from their refugee status. On one hand, statutory refugees can avoid political involvement, while on the other hand, some Tunisian activists