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Tunisia - 1961

6 July

Bourguiba, Habib (President of Tunisia)

- Message sent to President de Gaulle
(by special messenger)

MESSAGE SENT BY PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA

TO PRESIDENT DE GAULLE

by special messenger, on July 6th 1961

Mr President :

A serious situation, which we have to settle urgently so as to save the relationship between our two countries, is compelling me to send you, without any delay, this message of an exceptional kind. I have asked my closest assistant to deliver it to you.

I have dedicated thirty years of my life time to promote a free cooperation between Tunisia and France. That allows me, I think, to highly assert, whenever necessary, that there is something I put above that cooperation and indeed above everything : that is the full sovereignty of Tunisia, without any limitation other than what is freely accepted.

Now Tunisia which has gained its internal and external sovereignty on March 20th 1956, has been, for more that five years now, prevented from exercising it on the whole extent of its territory, against the will of her people and government; a will which was clearly and publicly expressed on every occasion, duly communicated to the French Government through the diplomatic channel, and which I expressed to you personally on the 27th of last February.

In spite of these reiterated requests, France has been refusing, as of now, to accept the principle of evacuation and to earnestly consider the withdrawal of her troops from the Bizerta basis and our southern territories.

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During the conversation I had the honour to have with you at Rambouillet on the 27th of last february, I have myself exposed to you our position on this matter. Tunisia is aiming at achieving, as soon as possible, the complete evacuation of the French troops from Bizerta and the southern border area of Tunisia. In order to achieve that goal I proposed to you the opening of negociations which would determine the terms and the calendar according to which the evacuation would be completed. I have also expressed to you my conviction that once this last remain of the colonial era has disappeared through friendly ways, the relations between our two countries will be immediately strengthened since the Bizerta basis and the neighbouring dockyard, will be reconverted, with the cooperation of France, into a naval yard with industrial installations, precious to the economic potentialities of Tunisia.

Only recently, because no consideration seemed to have been given to these propositions I asked the Representative of France in Tunisia to express to Your Excellency my concern about the attitude of the French Government.

I take the liberty of reminding you that on January 22nd 1960, due to the continuously negative attitude of France and the great reactions of the Tunisian public opinion, I announced the decision of the Government to start the battle for evacuation, which I hoped to be peaceful, beginning from February 8th, the second anniversary of the bombing of Sakiet. You are aware of the conditions and the spirit with which I took, after the barricades upheaval of Algier, the heavy responsibility of stopping the popular outburst

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until the solution of the French crisis, because I had the tenacious hope that once that crisis is overcome a friendly solution of the problem that divides us would be more easily reached.

Today, instead of the hoped for solution, we see that the French Government or at least the French Commander of Bizerta is undertaking in the concerned area an extension of the running-strip to the end of allowing the use of new types of planes, which would result into increasing the military potentialities of the basis.

This new fact seems serious in so far that it reveals the will of the French authorities to settle down in the statu-quo and even to try and aggravate it. The Tunisian people and I cannot see in this but the evidence that the French Government seems to scorn our national dignity, ignore our just claims, and is not convinced of our determination to achieve at any cost the liberation of our national territory.

In these conditions, I feel compelled, Mr. President, to bring to your knowledge our firm and irrevocable decision to see a term put to this situation against which the Tunisian people is unanimously standing.

If, as it is still my hope, the principle of evacuation is accepted by the French Government, the necessary contacts to define its modalities can be taken as soon as possible.

I wish to state again that as far as we are concerned, we want to act so that what is today a matter of dispute will be in the future the starting point of a free and fruitful cooperation between our two countries.

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Tunisia has shown a great deal of understanding and good will throughout the process that brings the substitution of normal relations to those of the colonial era, of which, Mr. President, you have yourself said more than once that they were out dated. She has contributed in many ways to the ripening and the now expected solution of the Algerian conflict. She never let herself to "frenzy"

In the vast movement of decolonisation she has taken the lead. Today she cannot suffer any longer unfringements of her sovereignty and encroachments on her national integrity without endangering her position authority and vital interests.

Mr. President, you have yourself enough stressed how much "it is intolerable to a State that its destiny should be decided by the action and decision of another State whatever friendly it might be" to easily understand our feeling and our decision.

You and I, are both aware that military bases in foreign countries are prolonging a terminated era, and that everywhere the Great Powers and France herself are giving them up. We are also aware that the process of decolonization which has been started has to be completed; that it does tighten rather than loosen the links which are uniting us, and that it is by giving up the last aspects of domination that true cooperation is obtained.

The man who had too given the best of himself to restore the independance of his country and who wishes, on his part, to dedicate his last efforts to the recovery of his homeland, to its progress and prosperity, adjures you to save our two countries from new and useless trials.
