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“A Study of Tunisia’s Educational Reform Efforts”

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This paper attempts to examine major historical developments of educational reform efforts undertaken in Tunisia since the late 1800s. With Tunisia’s educational reform efforts greatly influenced by the Ottoman Empire, the impact that its political elite had on the educational reform program mapped out by Tunisia’s Prime Minister Khayr al-Din B’asha in 1873 will be outlined. Since the Ottoman Empire provided the impetus and momentum for reform based on western concepts, a major part of the Prime Minister’s reform program consisted of combining traditional Islamic learning with western knowledge. Although there were numerous reform ideologies that emerged at that time, this paper will examine two main types of reform movements: the secular-based movement and the Islamic modernist movement. The secular-based movement provided a nationalist foundation which emphasized western aspects for reform. The Islamist movement adopted a more religious foundation that encouraged holding a relatively broad range of religious views. The majority viewed Islam primarily in personal terms and did not analyze broader issues of social structure and communal identity being governed by modern ideas. Most of them moved toward an individualized style of Islam within the framework of a modern, secularist orientation. In fact, it was the Sadiki College which the Prime Minister established that had the greatest and most long-lasting impact on most of Tunisia’s next generation of leaders. As a result, Tunisia’s educational system evolved and helped scholars move away from subjugation to self-assertion. Although conservative Tunisian Muslim scholars gradually accepted reform, they seldom participated in opposition movements. Instead, they relied on their political skills to limit change and remove reformers who advocated westernization from positions of power. Since reform efforts undertaken by Zaytuna University also encouraged conservative Muslim scholars to adopt educational reforms, this study will also examine the reform program outlined by the Zaytuna University. The second part of this paper will explore the educational policies that developed after Tunisia’s declaration of independence from French occupation in 1956. Issues that developed during President Bourgiba’s term in office (1958 – 1987) will also be identified to highlight the major steps that helped secularize Tunisia’s educational system.