

## ‘North Africa — a powder keg’, from Die Welt (27 July 1954)

**Caption:** In July 1954, the German daily newspaper Die Welt analyses the tensions existing between France and its protectorates in North Africa and speculates on the possibility of another war of independence in Morocco and Tunisia.

**Source:** Die Welt. Unabhängige Tageszeitung. Hrsg. SCHULTE, Heinrich ; Herausgeber ZEHRER, Hans. 27.07.1954, n° 171; 9. Jg. Hamburg: Die Welt. "Brandherd Nordafrika", auteur:Wirsing, Giselher , p. 2.

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## North Africa — a powder keg

by Giselher Wirsing

### France's two problem children

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#### A new Indochina?

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#### Nationalists and terrorists

After Indochina, the two Protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia have become France's most difficult 'problem children'. During a long journey that took us from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the border with Libya, we have, over these past few months, experienced how a crisis that has been smouldering for years has intensified into open civil war. In Morocco, it is true to say that the countryside is, by and large, still peaceful, but acts of terrorism in the cities are increasing at a frightening rate. The coastal road in Tunisia is scarcely passable any more, and the interior of the country is already so deeply embroiled in the guerrilla war that it has become virtually inaccessible. A state of emergency has been declared there and martial law imposed.

In Tunisia, as in Morocco, the present-day French administrators are having to pay for the mistakes of their predecessors. The deposition of the Sultan of Morocco nearly a year ago is, today in Rabat, attributed to the operations of the Berber princes and, above all, of the pashas of Marrakech, the Glaiu. In reality, the position of the Sultan might have remained tenable if the General Residence had explained from the outset that it did not wish to undermine his position. On the other hand, Tunisia was, for more than 18 months to September 1953, ruled by a narrow-minded, despotic bureaucrat, who, in addition, became a cat's paw of the Corsican Mafia, which was adept at steering the French colony on the most disastrous course.

As in Tunisia, so also in Morocco: the time is long since past when the authorities could still hope to defeat the terrorist movement simply through police action. The elimination of the responsible nationalist leaders, their exile and arrest, could only result in the extremists coming to the fore. It is emphasised in Rabat and Tunis that they form only a small minority. This may well be correct, but every revolutionary movement has been led by a minority that drags the passive masses along with it. Events between 1789 and 1792 repeatedly demonstrate this fact, and Arab leaders always point emphatically to this period.

Any outside observer who has gained a strong impression of French colonisation — especially in Morocco — and who has seen what amazing results a tough and hard-working section of the population has achieved would find it hard to accept the easy excuses that conceal the crux of the problem. Every attempt at reform in Morocco and Tunisia is doomed to failure if it does not take into account the actual motive forces in both countries: the Istiqlal party in Morocco and the Destur in Tunis.

The demands of the authoritative leaders of both nationalist parties are still relatively limited, even though it becomes daily more difficult to distinguish between terrorists and responsible nationalists. The nationalist leaders, too, recognise the enormous danger that lies in unbridled terror. There is already a terrifyingly swift descent into anarchy. If hundreds of young people come to accept killing by ambush as a heroic act, the whole of society will suffer the most severe shocks. Very soon, the sorcerer's apprentices will find themselves powerless in the face of their own creations.

So the French have to face up to the extraordinary dilemma that they can only preserve their sphere of influence in North Africa by making a settlement with the nationalists and allowing them to make their decisive contribution to the future shape of their country. Since they have at the same time to combat terrorism, some extremely bold diplomacy is called for. To crown it all, every such attempt to make serious concessions will be fiercely opposed by the extremist French colonist organisations, together with their covert allies in Paris. That is why this third factor, the French colonists in Tunisia and Morocco, represents by far the most serious problem. The French terrorist organisation in Tunisia — the first signs of a similar development in Morocco are now starting to show — is no less an obstacle to a peaceful solution than are

the Arab terrorists.

In Morocco, reform will have to begin with the removal without any fuss of the usurper sultan who was installed the previous year and with the French authorities abandoning their policy of relying on the support of the Berbers, whom they could play off against the Arabs. They can no longer play this card successfully.

In Tunisia, only the leaders of the Destur could restore peace as responsible government ministers. In both protectorates, it might well be that France will have to surrender many positions that it holds today, with a certain amount of difficulty, but French influence in both countries could, nevertheless, still be safeguarded.

To move in the other direction would only lead to naked dictatorship. In the short term, it may well secure the facade of its authority, but, in the longer term, it becomes totally futile, because the colonists' peaceful development and hard work would no longer be possible. Instead, the real signs of a mass exodus of French nationals from Tunisia are already evident and come as a warning. It is a question of whether Morocco and Tunisia become a second Indochina over the next few years. This can still be prevented, but the danger is great, and the courage to look the problems, with all their elemental force, straight in the eye is small.