

Non-Fiction**Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly, by Safwan M Masri**

Its focus on education has forged a modern society, with a longstanding reform agenda



Tunisia gradually took religion out of public life, gave quality education to its children and greater equality to its women © AFP

8 HOURS AGO by Review by David Gardner

The soaring hopes of the Arab uprisings against tyranny, that began in Tunisia with the overthrow of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, have long since crashed to earth. The exception is that first Jasmine Revolution.

In his book explaining why [Tunisia](#) is an “Arab anomaly”, Safwan Masri says it was “predisposed to democracy because of ingredients that are uniquely indigenous to it”. This is a controversial proposition but Masri sustains it, in a hymn to Tunisia that is also an examination of Arab shortcomings elsewhere — above all in education.

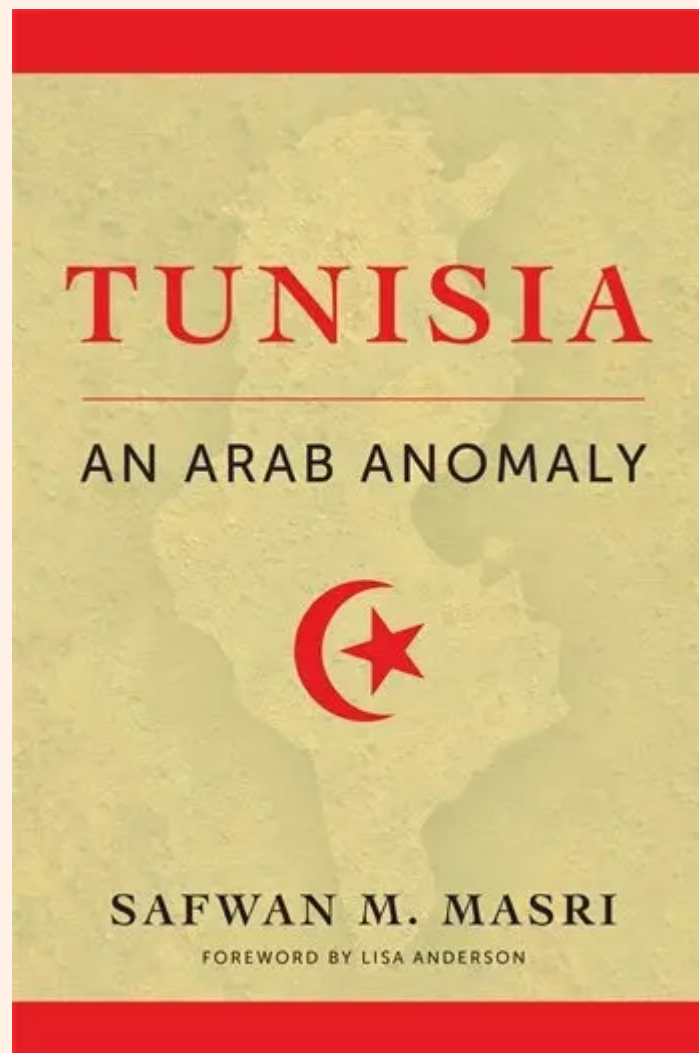
Masri guides us through a history of cumulative reform in Tunisia that shows how the (so far) democratic outcome was long in the making.

Tunisia has a small, homogeneous population that emerged from a diverse civilisational background — Phoenician and Carthaginian, Roman and Byzantine, Arab and Berber, Ottoman and French, and Christian (Saint Augustine of Hippo) as well as Muslim (the great 14th century philosopher Ibn Khaldun). It is Mediterranean as much as Arab, and was spared the twin

cataclysms of medieval Islam at opposite ends of the Mediterranean: Spain's reconquista of al-Andalus and the Mongol devastations that ended Islam's Golden Age.

Tunisia, Masri argues, "a nation within and without the Arab world", developed a tradition of reform, which gradually took religion out of public life, gave quality education to its children and greater equality to women.

Tunisia's was the first constitution in the Arab world in 1861. It abolished slavery before the US. When the evolution of constitutional politics was blocked by French rule — just as the British did in Egypt — Tunisia worked on education: establishing elite Sadiki College in 1875 and, crucially, forging links between this liberal school and both the ancient Zaitouna centre of Islamic learning in Tunis and with metropolitan France.



It meant that during the movement for independence from France and the transition from the Ben Ali dictatorship, Tunisia could count on a robust civil society, notably the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), the trade union federation at its heart, with long experience of mobilisation and bargaining. Along with human rights, business and professional groups, the

UGTT was instrumental in persuading Ennahda — the Islamist party that came first in the 2011 elections — to step down, in the critical year of 2013, when the Muslim Brotherhood was toppled from power in Egypt.

It was “the civil society that UGTT helped to create [that] took hold of an orphaned revolution and turned it into a democratic transition” — to such effect that Ennahda last year redefined itself from Islamist to Muslim Democrat, Masri says.

The dominant figure in his narrative is Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia’s first independence leader and founding father, in the same way Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was for Turkey. Bourguiba turned tyrannical in his mentally unstable later years. But the early Bourguiba did three great things: he defanged religion (“Putting Religion in its Place” is one of the book’s best chapters); he enshrined [women’s rights](#) in the *code du statut personnel* — unique in the Arab world; and he created secular, coeducational and bilingual schools.

Masri, who is in charge of Columbia University’s global network of research hubs (including in his native Jordan), has done Arabs an enormous service by highlighting the catastrophic state of their [education systems](#) — despotic and as intellectually sterile as the political systems that engendered them. Stultifying rote learning is overlain with a narrow-minded religiosity that stifles curiosity, critical thinking, originality and self-expression. Education, often surrendered to Islamists to co-opt them, became a device to build a national identity after decolonisation when, “instead of nations becoming states we had states that were . . . in search of nations”.

Tunisia, in Masri’s compelling story, “was spared the struggle for national identity that made Islam the badge of honour in societies that had little else on which to pin their new-found independence. [Tunisia](#) did not need Islam to define its identity”.

The writer is the FT’s international affairs editor

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