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Abidi-Belhadj, Beya

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## Transforming and Interpreting the Kasbah: The Negotiation of Centrality in Tunis

*Beya Abidi-Belhadj*\*

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**Abstract:** »*Umgestaltung und Interpretation der Kasbah: Aushandeln von Zentralität in Tunis*«. The kasbah has been considered the main place of power in Tunis since the Middle Ages. Its urban structure was stabilised during the Ottoman era. Since then, the governmental functions of the kasbah have always been confirmed: many ministerial functions are carried out in the buildings around its central square, located at the top of the old city of Tunis. This space is perceived as morphologically separate from the medina and functionally dedicated to issues related to the central sphere. This contrasts with the space of the medina, which was historically regulated by the local civic sphere. In spite of this apparent opposition of functions, the purpose of this study is to reflect on the nature of the kasbah as a public place, as a monumental and architectural expression of a negotiated form of power and centrality, and finally, yet importantly, as an urban district participating in ordering the medina. It is where local urban functions such as markets and mosques were located. It structured the civic dimension embodied by the *Beldi-s*, a group of urban notables entrusted with most responsibilities in local institutions as professions (guilds, markets, trade), confessional communities, neighbourhoods, and the city as a whole. In contrast with interpretations based on a dichotomic vision of urban morphologies and functions, the aim here is to highlight the intertwining of spaces and the importance of connections between political and commercial centralities in everyday practices, an angle of interpretation that invites nuance into discussions on the nature of centrality.

**Keywords:** Kasbah, urban centrality, public space, Tunis.

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\* Beya Abidi-Belhadj, Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Literature of Manouba (FLAHM), Laboratory of Archaeology and North African Architecture (LAAM), Université de la Manouba, Tunisia. Campus Universitaire de la Manouba - 2010 Manouba, Tunisia; [beya.abidi@flah.uma.tn](mailto:beya.abidi@flah.uma.tn). This article is part of the HSR Forum "Transforming Cities, Negotiating Centrality: Markets and Civic Buildings in Comparative Perspective (XVth century - XXth century)" edited by Colin Arnaud, Nora Lafi, and Alessandra Ferrighi. It has been first debated in the session M05 of the Conference of the European Association on Urban History (EAUH) in Rome on 1 September 2018.

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## 1. Introduction: The Kasbah, Centre of Power and Expression of Centrality

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The kasbah, which emerged in the Middle Ages as a defensive space dedicated to military functions, has, since the Hafsid era (13th-15th century) (Daoulatli 1976; Hassen 1999; Brunshvig 1940; Djelloul 1999), been considered the main site of power in Tunis. Its urban structure stabilised during the Ottoman era and particularly in the 17th century under the local ruler Hamouda Pasha (1635-1666) with two octagonal bastions built by the dey Hadj Mustapha Qara Kuz in 1665-1667 (Djelloul 1999, 88). Since then, the governmental functions of the kasbah have been continually reinforced: many ministerial functions have been held in the buildings around its central square, located at the top of the medina. This space is perceived as morphologically separate from the medina and functionally dedicated to issues related to the central sphere, in contrast with the space of the old city, which was historically regulated by the local civic sphere. In spite of this apparent opposition of functions, the purpose of this study is to reflect on the nature of the kasbah as a public space, as a monumental and architectural expression of a negotiated form of power and centrality, and, finally, yet importantly, as an urban district participating in the ordering of the medina, where local urban functions such as markets and mosques were located. It structured the civic dimension embodied by the *Beldi-s*, a group of urban notables trusting most responsibilities in local institutions at the scale of professions (guilds, markets, trade), confessional communities, neighbourhoods, and the city as a whole. In contrast with interpretations based on a dichotomic vision of urban morphologies and functions, the aim here is to highlight the intertwining of spaces and the importance of the connections between political and commercial centralities in everyday practices, an angle of interpretation that invites nuance into discussions on the nature of centrality. The article is mostly based on a study of archival documents held in the National Archives of Tunisia (A.N.T.).

Built in the Middle Ages on a territory that had in ancient times acquired high symbolic and religious value (Daoulatli 1976, 253), the Kasbah of Tunis has undergone morphological changes in connection with evolving institutional structures and ideologies of power through all phases of its history. The kasbah is described by Taoufik Bachrouch as a creation of the Almohad era (12th century C.E.), probably on the foundations of fortifications from the Aghlabid era (9th century) (Bachrouch 2008, 703). Archaeological excavations supervised by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Doulatli in 1969 illustrated how this space had been occupied since ancient times (Daoulatli 1976). Important monumental extensions took place under the Hafsid dynasty. For Taoufik Bachrouch, the kasbah “is seen as the seat of power and its symbol, where investiture ceremonies took place, the Almohads and the Hafsids resided, the place where

soldiers were stationed” (2008, 703). Pilgrim Anselm Adorno (1470), on his way to Jerusalem in 1470, described it in these terms:

To the west of the city stands an exceptionally large castle, called Kasba, where the king resides for most of the year. It has a perimeter of a mile and a half, and is very well protected, although it is not surrounded by walls. It has gates which are arched and well-guarded [...] This castle is so beautiful inside and so rich in its buildings that I would have difficulty in describing it. It is situated in a pleasant and beautiful place close to the Great Mosque. (Bachrouch 2008, 705)

Laurent D’Arvieux (1635-1702) from Marseilles, on a diplomatic mission to Tunis, wrote in 1665 that the kasbah serves as a wall to the city on the southern side. Its first door opens on the city. In front of it there is a large square, on which workers of the market and soldiers rest during summer heats (Bachrouch 2008, 705).

The total surface of the kasbah, including Hafsid and Ottoman additions, reaches about the equivalent of 1/4 of the surface of the medina. In the framework of the typical medieval opposition between citadel and city (Blieck et al. 2002), it was often perceived as an independent and fortified space defending the military castle that supervised the sphere of central power (Daoulatli 1979, 4). Its centrality can be identified by the conjunction of three essential elements: administrative facilities, political decision-making centres, and buildings with a high heritage and historical value. In order to meet a constantly renewed institutional and ideological horizon of expectation, this centre has undergone major changes that have certainly affected its spatiality. Strata of demolition, reconstruction, and restructuring have gradually altered this space.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the nature of these successive transformations, the way in which they express, in the urban form, mutations at the level of power and social organisation, and how they invite reflection on the nature of a historically produced form of centrality in its relationship with another form of centrality: that emanating from the medina. The aim, too, is to examine present challenges under the lens of this legacy.

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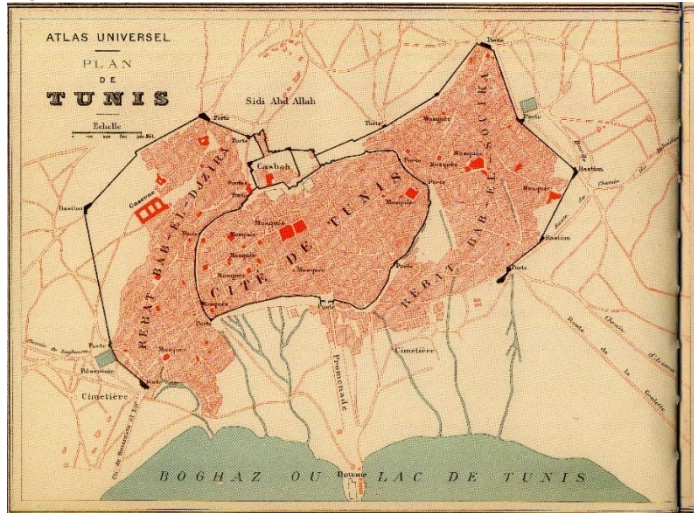
## 2. The Progressive Construction of a Negotiated Centrality

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The need for control by rulers representing the central sphere over the city as a whole, and mostly over its commercial and civic dimensions, its neighbourhoods, and the spaces of its guilds and markets, was probably among the original *raison d’être* of the kasbah when medieval dynasties elevated Tunis to the status of capital city. It is the ideal position for controlling and supervising both urban life and the adjoining rural environment. From the top of

the citadel, it was easy to watch the *Sabkha*, the plains of *Bardo* and *Manouba*, and a landscape criss-crossed by numerous vital roads. On the east side, the *Medina* spread downhill in the direction of the lake, in the south and north, the two suburbs of *Bab Souika* and *Bab Djazira* were also within several gates regulating communication between the kasbah and the surrounding districts, often inhabited by the ruling elite. With this strong and strategic position, the kasbah play a key role in the political history of the city and in its spatial organization.

**Figure 1** Situation of the Kasbah



Source: Arthème Jean-François, *Atlas Universel*, Paris, Fayard, 1877.

Through its morphology and function, the kasbah influenced the general characteristics of the city. It encompassed all the functions inherent to its role as the seat and residence of the central political power. It was distinguished from the rest of the urban space by the grouping of power establishments and public utilities, and by the coexistence of multiple urban functions whose area of influence extended to the entire region.

Since the Hafsids period, its spatial layout gave morphological and architectural expression to symbolic and social hierarchies, above all through the presence of the royal residence and its annexes. The kasbah contained several courtyards surrounded by buildings: guard quarters, shops, stables, prisons, and the homes of high court dignitaries. Court life was meticulously organized according to a ceremony worthy of the rulers of the time (Sebag 1998; Saadaoui 1999, 2006). The complex also included the barracks, symbol of military power. Also, the *khotba* mosque, built in 1233, was an important place of sociability and gathering, a place for prayer and sometimes for assembly.

This mosque was the representation par excellence of the religious dimension of central power, strongly participating in the ideological construction of this part of the city as a district of political, administrative, and military central power, in contrast with the main mosque of the medina, *Ezzitouna*. These components represented the transcription of centrality, towards which everything converged. Gradually, the kasbah was transformed from a citadel into a political-administrative centre. The functional centrality made this space one of the most frequented and used places of the whole city, together with the *suqs* and places of worship and madrasa (schools) of the medina.

Following the occupation of Tunis by Charles Quint from 1535 to 1574, the subsequent integration of Tunis into the Ottoman empire, and decades of Spanish attempts at seizing this region of North Africa, in which many Muslim, Jewish, and Christian refugees from Spain had settled, new architectural elements were added to the kasbah. These contributed to the strengthening of its centrality and influence in relation to the adjacent urban body. The pasha, representative of the Ottoman sultan, resided in a palace situated in the kasbah and convened his council there (Sebag 1998, 170; Saadaoui 1999). The kasbah expanded and adapted to the requirements of a new form of administration and received additional administrative and service equipment. New buildings were added (the *Dar al-Baroud* gunpowder factory, barracks, officers' accommodations, etc.). New breakthroughs were made to improve the accessibility of the site. The Ottoman urban planning practice ensured that the places of power were in communication with buildings in daily use (Sebag 1998, 170). A college and a hospital were built in the immediate vicinity of the kasbah. This resulted in the creation of a space that was not formally medina or kasbah, but which played a connecting role. It created a new dimension of public space. This evolution tended to reinforce the centrality of the kasbah by diversifying its character on the side of medina – the neighbourhood closest to the kasbah reinforced its prestige through the development of residences for the merchant aristocracy and the most prestigious guilds.

The articulation between kasbah and city underwent a new transformation at the end of the 17th century. This symbolic and spatial change reinvented the nature of centrality. *Hamouda Pasha* (1635-1666), a new governor of the Muradit dynasty (Raymond 2006), built his residence near the kasbah on the fringe of the medina (National Archives of Tunisia [A.N.T.], series E, card-board 585, folder 1, subfolder: 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Registre 139). The seat of political power was thus transferred outside the citadel (Daoulatli 1979, 65-7; Abdelkafi 1989, 224). The new seat of power owed its importance to its location at the exit of one of the main streets of the medina, connecting the kasbah to *Bab B'har*, crossing the *suqs*, and serving the *Ezzitouna* mosque (A.N.T. registre 6546). Traffic through this area was intense, especially during commercial, political, and religious events (Daoulatli 1979, 143). This is how, under the Muradit, the articulation between the kasbah and the medina created a new

connected form of centrality (A.N.T. series E, cardboard 585, folder 1, subfolder 9).

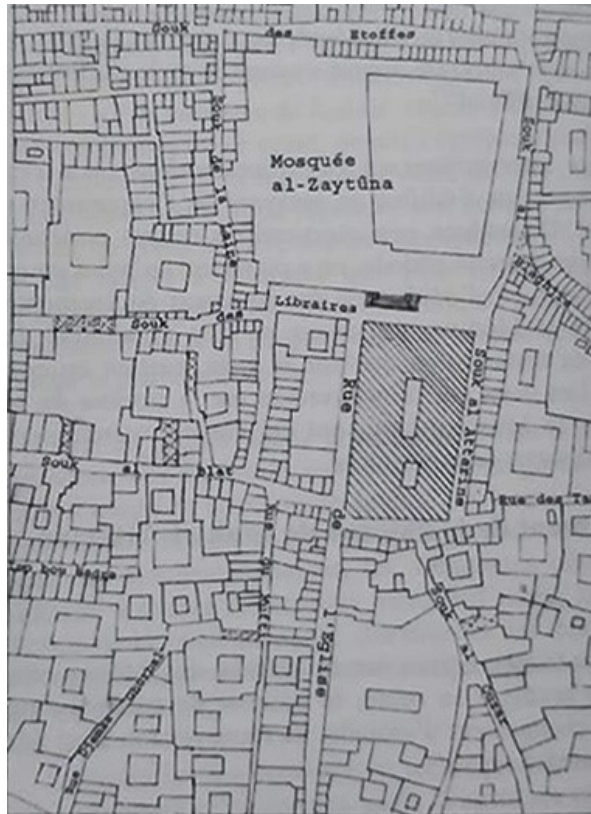
This change resulted in the kasbah being deprived of a large part of its political functions. However, it remained the basic cell and essential organ of urban formation for the entire area. Its surroundings were invested with other power institutions such as Dar el-Jeld (Binous, Driss, and Jabeur 2001, 132), Dar Daoulatli and Dar Cheikh El medina,<sup>1</sup> seat of the local urban municipal institutions (A.N.T. series SG, cardboard 31, folder 3. A.N.T. series SG2, cardboard 151ter, folder 1; Lafi 2019, 15-22): the main functions of the urban civic sphere settled in the part of the medina that was in the immediate vicinity of the kasbah.

This concentration made it possible to limit distances and provide a symbolic image corresponding to the Ottoman imperial ideology of a symbiosis between central functions and the local civic sphere (Lafi 2019, 1-52). The political centrality of the kasbah was in conjunction with the economic, religious, and civic centrality of the medina, where the concentration of activities triggered exchanges. The suqs, which form the main arteries of the medina, constitute the fundamental element in the organisation of the economic and social life of Tunis. The suqs comprised two main arteries (North-South and East-West) intersecting perpendicularly at the level of the Great Ezzitouna Mosque (Daoulatli 1976, 30-1). The development of these commercial streets was the result of linear extension. Each suq was specialized in terms of products and occupied a precise interval of a linear grid. The construction and management of these suqs were intricately linked to the nature of religious foundations: shops were generally the property of pious endowments (waqf/habus) for which they constituted a source of revenue (Raymond 2006). These areas played a decisive role in the organisation of the city's economic life. Trade and crafts were the main source of income for the inhabitants of the medina. Workers and traders lived in these production and commercial areas (*funduks* and *oukalas*). After the Mouradites, the beys of the Husseinite dynasty maintained their residences at the top of the city in the old kasbah, near which the Dâr al-Bey was also extended (Revault 1967, 43), until the 19th century.

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<sup>1</sup> This building has been recently destructed (Lafi 2020).

**Figure 2** Location of the suqs



Source: Matri 2008, 146.

This phase illustrates how complementary relationships in matters of centrality were progressively built between the seat of power and the city. In this highly dualistic composition, each element kept its own character, its symbolism, and the image it embodied in the urban space.

During the second half of the 19th century and the phase of Ottoman modernisation known as the era of the Tanzimat, the space of the kasbah was profoundly modified according to the priorities of the new imperial ideology. This also represented a renegotiation of the local features of imperialism between the centre and local elites (Lafi 2017).

The centrality of the kasbah was reinterpreted via the construction of new buildings and public spaces. The main square of the kasbah was also the object of Ottoman transformation and modernisation under Ahmed Bey (1837-1855).





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### 3. Colonial Spatial and Ideological Re-Figurations

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During the era of French colonial occupation (1881-1956), the centrality of the kasbah as a place of power was confirmed and even reinforced (Matri 2008, 79). It became the space to display the fiction of a protectorate on the one hand, and the symbol of the imposition of an external order on the other. The nature of the former complex centrality of the place, thus, was deeply altered and its link to the kind of civic centrality that emanated from the medina enduringly affected.

From the end of the 19th century onwards, the centrality of the kasbah was questioned by various architectural and planning interventions (Meddeb 2016). It became a space composed of buildings inherited from the medieval and Ottoman periods and of new colonial buildings, whose style and proportions were also reflections of the relationship between the colonial ideology and the perception of heritage in that context. The first urban transformations carried out in the kasbah after the occupation of Tunis by France were of a military nature. They began with the construction of new barracks for the Zouaves regiment of the French army. This was then supplemented by the construction of the war office, the current Ministry of Defence. These transformations constituted a clear rupture with the trend that had developed during the era of the Tanzimat: the monumentality of the new buildings was comparable, but their functions were different.

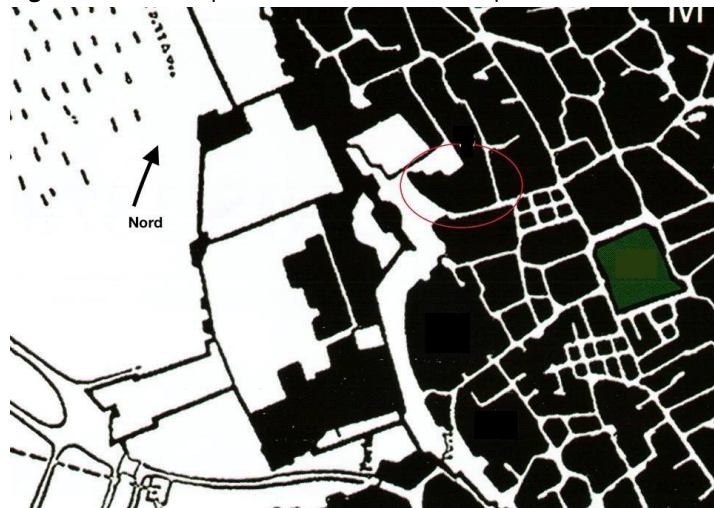
**Figure 4** Zouaves Barracks



Source: Office de la Topographie et du Cadastre.

Then, a new form of gradual dissociation began, both spatially and in terms of political and administrative functions, by shifting the centre of gravity outside of the confined space of the kasbah, gradually extending the new construction along the *Bab B'nat* (A.N.T. series M5, cardboard 11, folder 17) and *Bab Menara* boulevards drawn on the site of the ramparts, which were destroyed. Another disruption to the urban space was the development of the government square (A.N.T. series M5, cardboard 11, folder 24) and the establishment of the new administrative district, which led to the densification of the existing urban area between the kasbah and the medina, previously occupied by the *Es-Selsela* cemetery, which was destroyed. This represented a further step in the redefinition of the already blurred boundaries between the commercial city and the administrative and military city (A.N.T. Series E, box 621, folder 10, sub-folder 12).

**Figure 5** Kasbah Square before Colonial Development



Note: Detail of the Tunis Plan of 1878, we can see a building that occupies the current location of Kasbah Square (circled).

In order to reorganise the current Place du Government, the city government was obliged to expropriate all the shops.

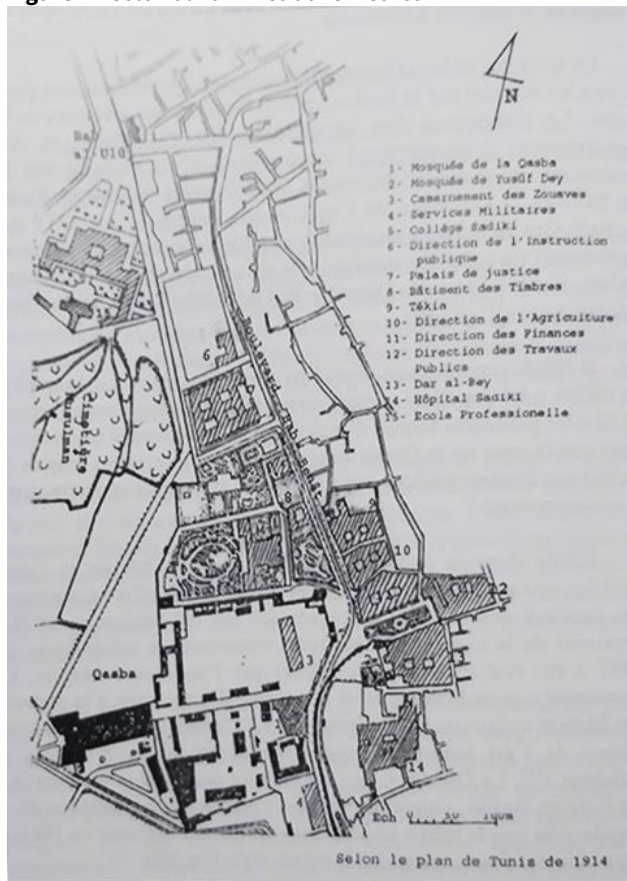
This process continued with the creation of a tramway bypassing the medina and linking the kasbah with the part of city on the other side of medina, which began to be known as the European city (in fact, this neighbourhood of medieval origins had been developed as a modern planned neighbourhood at the end of the Ottoman era). This both made the kasbah a connecting space and weakened the commercial centrality of a medina increasingly seen in terms of heritage.



While the kasbah contained most of the medieval and Ottoman power structures, its surroundings were almost devoid of them. It was within the framework of the colonial planning project that this area was filled with colonial constructions (A.N.T. Series SG, cardboard 31, folder 3).

Despite these restructuring projects of streets and large public buildings, the whole did not produce a radically different general perception of the site. The kasbah itself kept most of its integrity until the end of the colonial period.

**Figure 7** Colonial Administrative District



Source: Matri 2008, 236.

**Figure 8** View of the Government Square Taken from the Kasbah in 1950



Source: Post Card, Private Collection.

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#### 4. The Kasbah Since Independence: Destructions, Constructions, and Contested Centralities

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Important changes to the Kasbah Square took place in the aftermath of independence in 1956. The centrality of the medina was no longer on the agenda because of the emergence of new socio-economic and cultural representations of the relationship between architecture, space, and society. The new definition of urban space contrasted strongly with the past. Among political leaders of the independence generation, making a clean slate of the existing situation was the dominant approach. The aim was to reshape the city with new urban and architectural designs. A progressive remodelling thus begun, with the objective of re-qualifying the historical, architectural, and urban heritage to ensure a quality of occupation in line with the modern way of life.

In this process, the kasbah was at the heart of a multitude of reflections, projects, and debates (Bohli Nouri 2015). The country's new leader, Habib Bourguiba, was keen on modernism and ordered large projects that led to the destruction of important remnants of the historical kasbah. The political centrality of the kasbah was reinforced however, with the construction of the House of the Party and the creation of a large square for political gatherings. Architects Bernard Zehrfuss, Mikhail Kosmin, Olivier Clément Cacoub, and Mohamed Taïeb Haddad were part of this process, during which a variety of architects and planners were consulted (see Abdelkafi 2017, 194).

These projects were often linked, at least on a rhetorical level, to those of the renovation of the medina. However, precise objectives were lacking in this regard. The main priority was to provide presidential power with a new image of modern centrality.

In 1959, the kasbah was thus dramatically destroyed. The medieval walls of the enclosure were knocked down along with the entrance gates that opened towards the medina. Offices and barracks were also destroyed as was the powerful tower to the north opposite the Ministry of Agriculture, which occupied an exceptionally large piece of land. In 1960, both octagonal bastions of the kasbah were destroyed (Djelloul 1999, 88).

These demolitions provided space for the House of the Party and the esplanade. In 1969, *Bab Sidi Qasim* was truncated by the removal of its western bastion, which occupied an especially important piece of land. This accelerated the degradation of the historic building.

In front of the esplanade, a new road was built to link the old Kasbah Square to the outer boulevards. This made it easier for people to drive around the city and was part of the policies favouring private motorisation at the expense of heritage (Sebag 1998, 626). Paradoxically, the destruction of the walls reinforced the spatial rupture between the two central nuclei, medina and kasbah.

Various plans for the site of the dismantled barracks were successively discussed, with proposals to build either an administrative city or to develop a large pedestrian square (Bohli Nouri 2015, 79-89). Meanwhile, large parts of the old kasbah had been transformed into parking lots for the cars of central government officials grouped in the area. It is only in the 1970s that this situation began to be re-examined.

The turn of the 1970s indeed was both an illustration of this process of modernization and the exposure of its consequences. During this phase, public policies insisted particularly on the notion of public space and continued to reinforce the political centrality of the new kasbah, with the construction of several new government buildings. The programme provided for the development of the government square. It also provided for a set of buildings spread over 7 hectares including the National Assembly, the Ministry of National Economy, the Ministry of Culture, the headquarters of the Destourian Socialist Party, and that of the Municipality of Tunis, as well as an outdoor amphitheatre and the National Library. Only parts of this programme were implemented. The new kasbah, however, had its image of national centrality reinforced.

**Figure 9** Demolition of the Walls and Barracks of the Kasbah



Source: Adbelkafi and Lasram 2017.

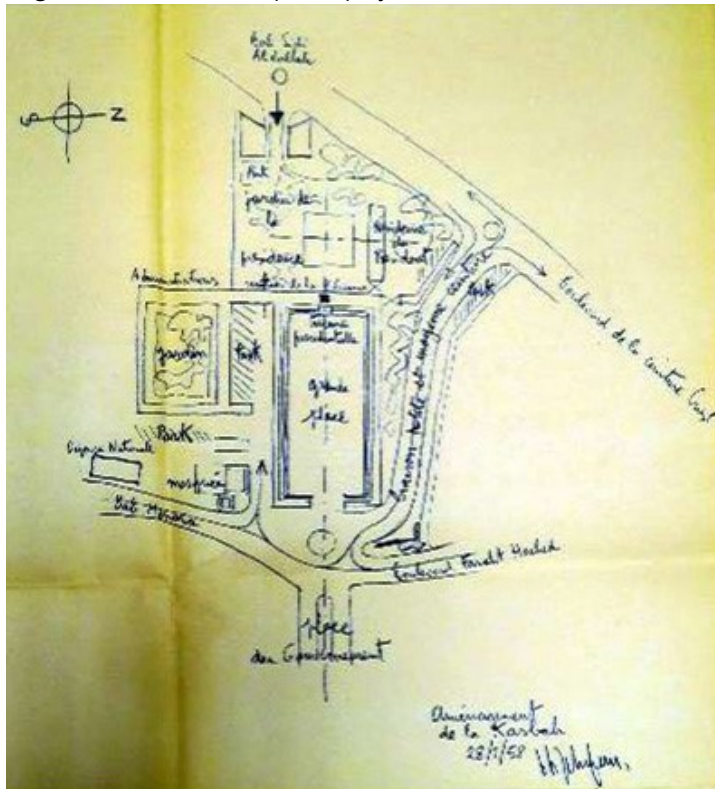
In 1990, under President Ben Ali, the project to build the new Tunis City Hall, in front of the Party House was launched. Through this endeavour, the kasbah again appeared at the centre of presidential interests.

The layout of the main square comprised a new national monument by artist Abdelfattah Boussetta.

The importance and symbolism of Kasbah Square was also reflected, in the scale that the square had acquired following independence, having become a place for political gatherings. The main speeches of Bourguiba and Ben Ali were delivered from this square.



**Figure 10** Kasbah development project



Source: Bohli Nouri 2015, 283.

**Figure 11** Current layout plan of the City Hall and Kasbah Square



Source: Plan by architect Wassim Ben Mahmoud presented as part of the “Paysages urbains en Tunisie” exhibition, curated by Adbelkafi, Tunis 12-31 May 2017.

**Figure 12** Habib Bourguiba on Kasbah Square



Source: [https://www.leaders.com.tn/uploads/media/original/158609420539\\_media.jpg](https://www.leaders.com.tn/uploads/media/original/158609420539_media.jpg) (Accessed 18 July 2022).

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## 5. Conclusion

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This political dimension was reinterpreted after the revolution of 14 January 2011. The Kasbah Square now has a new image and a new landscape. It is now more of a symbolic space, alive with the impulses of public debate. Protesters and petitioners from the whole country demonstrate and meet on the square, which now represents a space for the exchange of information and ideas. Above all, the kasbah refers to a political space in which public opinion is constructed, a place accessible to all citizens who gather to protest. Thus, it remains at the heart of political debate, not only for its political and administrative role, but also for its status as a central element of the urban structure. Its centrality is now less hegemonic in the sense of expressing the centrality of power, which is now more diffuse in society. This process can be seen, however, as a confirmation and even reinforcement of the centrality of the square. The Kasbah of Tunis has thus been a point of continuity as well as urban and political centrality since the Hafsid era. It owes this continuity over time to its location, which radiates and promotes multi-directional accessibility, and a regular road network. In spite of profound changes and difficulties in historic preservation, its cultural centrality has never ceased to be associated with political centrality (Oueslati-Hammami 2010; Chabbi 2012, 2016).

The history of the kasbah illustrates, surprisingly, that this landscape of power has not resulted in an enhanced vertical centrality, but in an increasing openness and connectivity of the kasbah with the city.

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