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SUBJECT: ANNUAL JEWISH PILGRIMAGE PROCEEDS PEACEFULLY

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: From May 22-23, between five and six thousand Jewish pilgrims visited the island of Djerba as part of an annual pilgrimage. The center of the pilgrimage is the El-Ghriba synagogue, the oldest synagogue in North Africa. The event was characterized by a visible police presence and high levels of security. The Tunisian Minister of Tourism and other government officials visited the synagogue during the pilgrimage. The minister's speech was punctuated by pro-Ben Ali chanting by ruling party members. While most of the pilgrims were from France or Israel, several dozen came from the United States. Some 40 reporters from various media outlets covered the event. End Summary.



2. (SBU) Prior to World War II, there were several hundred thousand Jews living in Tunisia, mostly on the island of Djerba. Most immigrated to France or Israel after the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars. According to Youssef Ouazen, the President of the Jewish community in Djerba, the island is now home to roughly 950 Jews. Approximately another thousand Jews live elsewhere in Tunisia. The Jewish community in Djerba has 15 synagogues, the most prominent of which is the El-Ghriba synagogue, the oldest synagogue in North Africa. The community is known for being both conservative and traditional, though it has begun to accept financial support from the American Joint Distribution Committee (Joint). The Joint is currently funding the construction and refurbishment of two schools and a community center in Djerba, in addition to a non-denominational day school for the handicapped.

3. (SBU) According to local history, the El-Ghriba synagogue was constructed on the site where a holy stone fell from heaven. The synagogue is a place of pilgrimage on Lag b'Omer, which is the thirty-third day after the beginning of Passover. A large hostel for pilgrims was built across the street from the synagogue to help house the several thousand pilgrims that visit each year. In 2008, the pilgrimage took place from May 22-23. Security was tight. Visitors not part of large groups or package tours needed to have contacted local authorities in advance to be allowed access. There were frequent ID checks and road blocks; prior to entering the synagogue visitors passed through a metal detector and had their bags x-rayed. All vehicles approaching the synagogue were photographed.

4. (C) Local press reported that between five and six thousand Jewish pilgrims participated in the pilgrimage. Roger Bismuth, the elected leader of the Jewish community in Tunisia, told Ambassador that the actual number was probably closer to 4,000. Bismuth told us that he had gone to Djerba not to participate in the pilgrimage; rather, he had been sent by the GOT to "handle" the roughly 40 international journalists present. Poloff spoke with several dozen Americans who were in Djerba for the event. The visitors expressed satisfaction with the level of security and organization. Poloff also spoke to Khoudhir Elia, a rabbi from London, who said he felt that the government had been supportive of the event. Pilgrims were welcome to enter the synagogue and pray, and normal standards were relaxed. At other times of the year, visitors are requested to remove their shoes and cover their heads, but these requirements were not enforced during the pilgrimage. Indeed, many visitors sported shorts and sleeveless shirts, attire not usually welcomed in the synagogue.

5. (C) Tunisia's Grand Rabbi Haim Bitan gave a speech inside the synagogue during the pilgrimage thanking the GOT for supporting the Jewish community. His speech was followed by

one given by Tunisia's Minister of Tourism Khelil Lajimi. The minister briefly mentioned Tunisia's history of religious tolerance, and then proceeded to dwell at length on the many laudable qualities of President Ben Ali. Other ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) members were inside the synagogue as well, and punctuated Lajimi's remarks with periodic chants of "Ben Ali 2009!" One RCD member waved a banner calling on President Ben Ali to run for re-election, and many members of the assembled crowd waved Tunisian flags.

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