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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS JEWISH COMMUNITY IN DJERBA

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

Summary

1. (C) Leaders of the Jewish community on the southern island of Djerba were effusive about the support they received from the GOT when giving the Ambassador a tour of El Griba Synagogue, a local Jewish school, and a community center on May 13. The leadership of a school for disabled children was similarly positive about governmental support when the Ambassador visited the school, which is supported by an American NGO, on May 14. The Ambassador also discussed Tunisian-American relations, tourism, and immigration with



local businessmen and politicians during a dinner in Djerba. The group noted that the island, which relies heavily on European tourists, might suffer in 2010 as Europe grapples with the financial crisis. They were appreciative of the Obama Administration's public statements and policies so far, but said that they were waiting for action for peace in the Middle East. End Summary.

A Warm Welcome

2. (C) Perez Trabelsi and Yousef Uzon, Presidents of the Jewish Community in Djerba, enthusiastically greeted the Ambassador during his May 13-14 visit to the island. The island hosts 5,000 to 6,000 visitors every year during the festival of Lag B'omer in May. Trabelsi noted that approximately 700 visitors came from Israel, but the majority were from Europe. Both Trabelsi and Uzon expressed their gratitude for the GOT's support, including security for synagogues. The GOT also allows Jewish children to split the day between Tunisian schools and religious schools run by the community. As for Lag B'omer, Trabelsi and Uzon opined that the festival went smoothly despite an increasing number of visitors every year. The Jewish community in Djerba also enjoys good relations with organizations outside Tunisia. When showing the Ambassador a local school, Uzon also pointed out the computers in every classroom that were donated by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), an American NGO.

3. (C) Local businessmen and politicians offered some interesting insights during a May 13 dinner in Djerba. The group, which included member of parliament Mohamed Barouni, hotel manager Riyadh Ben Aissa, and banker Khaled Bounouh, speculated that Djerba might see a decline in tourism in 2010 as Europe feels the full effect of the global financial crisis. According to Ben Aissa, over 50 percent of his bookings occurred at the last-minute, which is common for the island. This injects a high-degree of uncertainty into the tourism industry, he said, in addition to making long-term planning difficult. He added that the hotel retains only a small core team of workers, relying more on short-term labor consisting mostly of young Tunisians when demand rises. His sister Dr. Wiam Rais noted that most Tunisian youth want badly to go abroad, be it for education or employment. As for the Obama Administration, the group was positive about the Administration's remarks so far. They said they would reserve judgment, however, pending further assessment of Obama's approach to the Middle East Peace Process, and actions taken to advance it.

4. (C) Barouni also offered up an interesting anecdote about a fellow member of parliament. He noted that one of his colleagues is noted for always wearing a red carnation. One day, however, he came to parliament wearing a white



carnation. When asked by his colleagues why, he chided his colleagues for forgetting that President Ben Ali was scheduled to speak to Parliament about his budget. The parliamentarian said that the white flower represented his surrender to Ben Ali's "carte blanche." The normally loquacious MP reportedly said that on this occasion he planned to say nothing.

5. (C) On May 14, Dr. Saghroun, one of the board members for a school for disabled children, gave the Ambassador a tour of the school's facilities, including a therapeutic farm. Dr. Saghroun was very appreciative of the JDC, which purchased the farm for the school for about \$80,000 earlier this year. The school was founded by Peace Corps volunteers in 1984, but is now run by a parents association in conjunction with local government officials. The school supports students until the age of 30, although provisions can be made for those over 30, with the goal of integrating them into society as much as possible. Its students range from mildly to severely disabled, and the school provides

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counseling and support to the parents as well as the children. The school plans to open a pre-school for disabled children in the near future.

Comment

6. (C) For its part, the Djerbian Jewish community is happy with the status quo, and appreciative of the security and financial support provided by the GOT. Like the rest of the island, however, their economic well-being is tied to the tourism industry. Djerba is one of the more prosperous parts of Tunisia, but the island is heavily reliant on seasonal tourism. The industry is primarily oriented towards mass-market hotels, not affluent travelers demanding luxury and a unique experience, thus it is vulnerable to economic downturns. It is possible that even if last-minute discounts continue to lure Europeans in 2010, profits would fall as hotels slash prices. End Comment.

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