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## ”Neo Destour”

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**Neo Destour** (Néo-Destour) was the name given by the French authorities to al-Ḥizb al-Ḥurr al-Dustūrī al-Jadīd (New Liberal Constitutionalist Party), the main nationalist party during colonial rule (1881–1956). Under the direction of Habib Bourguiba (al-Ḥabīb Bū Raqība, 1903–2000), the party led Tunisia to independence in 1956.

## 1. Early history of the party

Neo Destour was formed in 1934 after the rift between the two branches of the Destour Party founded in 1920. Destour was influenced by the Ḥarakat al-Shabāb al-Tūnisī (Young Tunisians), a reformist movement inspired by the policies of Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī (1828–90) that emerged in the 1870s. Destour's activities intensified in the 1920s and 1930s, until it was banned and dissolved by the French resident-general on 31 May 1933. When the party's executive committee imposed sanctions on Habib Bourguiba, the editor-in-chief of the party newspaper *L'Action Tunisienne*, who opposed the uncompromising strategy of 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Tha'ālibī (1876–1944) and his followers, threatening to exclude him, Bourguiba and his allies decided to form a new party at the congress of Ksar Hellal (Qaṣr Hilāl) in March 1934. Neo Destour was headed by Maḥmūd al-Māṭirī (d. 1972), with Bourguiba as his secretary general. The central committee also included his brother, M'ḥammad Bourguiba (d. 1953), al-Baḥrī Qīqa (1904–95), and al-Ṭāhir Ṣfar (1903–42).

## 2. Socio-cultural dissent

Three main topics divided the two Destour parties. The first was social: the Neo Destourian generation was younger, educated in France, and partial to European socialism, and it belonged to the emerging middle class, which differed from the Tunisian aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The divisions were also cultural: while al-Tha'ālibī and Vieux (Old) Destour adhered to the Islamic reformist current (*iṣlāḥ*), Bourguiba and his followers laid claim to the French revolution and democracy. At the same time, both Neo Destour and Vieux Destour referred to the Fundamental Pact of 1857 and the Tunisian Constitution of 1861 and shared the goal of an independent Tunisia. The division between the two was primarily tactical: Vieux Destour refused to collaborate in any way with the colonial powers, while Neo Destour took a more pragmatic approach. Bourguiba understood that refusal risked the isolation of the party and instead advocated the policy of *la main tendue* (outstretched hand) vis-à-vis France. He also hoped to broaden the party's appeal and enlarge its social base.

The leaders of Neo Destour could rely on seventy local chapters in 1934, and on this basis developed a campaign of propaganda and mobilisation: meetings and marches of party leaders in the cities, young men in uniform, anthems accompanied by Arab folk orchestras, and media offensives. The party programme aimed to improve social conditions in the country and ensure the political rights of Tunisians without contesting the legitimacy of the Protectorate or the French presence in Tunisia. After an initial phase of repression in 1934, when the party's

leaders were deported and its media silenced, the emergence of the Front Populaire (a left-wing government coalition that came to power in France in 1936) created the opportunity to pursue a pragmatic strategy. The new French government sought negotiations with Destour, but French colonists sabotaged the discussions. Frustrated, Neo Destour adopted a strategy of open opposition to the Protectorate, attempting to distinguish itself from Vieux Destour and from al-Tha‘ālibī in particular by political one-upmanship. Within Neo Destour the hardline approach triumphed over the more moderate line taken by Maḥmūd al-Māṭirī and resulted in strikes and massive demonstrations, which culminated in bloody repression in April 1938, when the police opened fire on the crowds, leaving twenty-two dead and 150 wounded. The leaders of Neo Destour were arrested, and the party was again dissolved.

In the aftermath of 1938, Neo Destour experienced a brief decline. After the fall of al-Munṣif Bey (r. 1942–3) in 1943, the party renewed its struggle for independence. Bourguiba, who was released from prison the same year, found increasing international support for Neo Destour during his exile in Arab countries from 1943 to 1949. In Tunisia, Ṣāliḥ b. Yūsuf (1907–61), the secretary general of Neo Destour, consolidated the party. He formed alliances with the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT, al-Ittiḥād al-‘Āmm al-Tūnisī lil-Shughl, Tunisian General Labour Union), whose presence amongst the working classes allowed the party to enlarge its social base. In 1950, Neo Destour had 231,000 members in 260 local organisations. Members of the bourgeoisie and Tunisian civil servants, disappointed in the Protectorate, also joined the party ranks.

The international strategy of Neo Destour, founded on pan-Arab solidarity and reliance on the United Nations, was abandoned in 1949. Bourguiba returned to Tunisia disillusioned with his earlier initiatives and convinced that Tunisian nationalism must take priority over efforts to mobilise international support. As with his pragmatic choice during the 1930s, he believed that cooperation with the French would offer a solution: Neo Destour participated in the reforms of the French-controlled government of Muḥammad Shanīq (1889–1976), in which Ṣāliḥ b. Yūsuf served as minister of justice. After 1951, however, before the French project of new constitutional reforms, the party denounced French attempts to institute “dual sovereignty” (*siyāda muzdawija*): it organised a general strike and lodged a formal complaint with the United Nations. Neo Destour was banned and its ministers arrested.

After 1952 Neo Destour undertook armed action against La Main Rouge (the Red Hand), a group of colonial extremists. Escalating political violence forced the government of Pierre Mendès-France (in office 1954–5) to initiate independence talks in 1954.

### **3. Dissent between Bourguibists and Yūsufists**

Ṣāliḥ b. Yūsuf opposed Bourguiba’s negotiation strategy and chose intransigence against France. The opposition between the two men was as much tactical as political, Ṣāliḥ b. Yūsuf being dedicated to pan-Arabism and the Islamic reference in the party’s political programme. The Zaytūna Mosque and the Tunisian bourgeoisie were both divided between the “Bourguibists” and the “Yūsufists.” As Ibn Yūsuf opposed Bourguiba publicly and refused to attend the annual party congress in Sfax in November of 1955, he was expelled from the party and forced to flee the country in January 1956, allowing Habib Bourguiba to become the new president of the Tunisian Republic after independence in 1956.

The conflict with the Yūsufists contributed to the transformation of Neo Destour into an instrument of power for Bourguiba. In 1956, Neo Destour claimed to have 600,000 members,

out of a total population of about four million. Party membership was essential to social advancement, as Neo Destour controlled, amongst other aspects of life, youth groups and trade unions. In 1956, Bourguiba forced the UGTT into submission by pressuring its secretary general, Aḥmad b. Šālīḥ (b. 1926)—who he felt acted too independently—into resigning. Bourguiba tolerated no opposition within the party, and the Supreme Court tried and condemned all Yūsufists and his former opponents. Šālīḥ b. Yūsuf was assassinated in Frankfurt on 14 August 1961. In 1963, Bourguiba banned the Communist Party after a plot against him. Neo Destour was henceforth a technocratic party which dominated every election.

At the same time, Neo Destour served as an instrument of Bourguiba's economic policy, in which the struggle against underdevelopment turned into a form of Destour socialism. The party enforced strict control over all agricultural, industrial, and trade unions in order to implement a planned economy. At the congress of Bizerte in 1964, Neo Destour became al-Ḥizb al-Ishtirākī al-Dustūrī (Parti Socialiste Destourien, PSD, Socialist Destour Party).

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