The introduction of radio broadcasting in North Africa did not merely represent a technological advance in the field of communications. The possibility of addressing a largely illiterate public for the first time directly and on a wide scale appealed to the French colonial administration. Radio could penetrate households, reach as far as the outskirts of the territory, and even open frontiers. However, for these very reasons radio media also escaped control by the authorities. Many works have already dealt with the story of Arabic programmes broadcast by Fascist and Nazi radio stations\(^1\) and the “war of the airwaves” during World War II is now well known.\(^2\) Thus, this study does not focus on propaganda broadcasting in Tunisia, but rather on the part played by radio listening and its evolution in a complex Tunisian society at the time of World War II.

Beginning in 1881, Tunisia was under the “protection” of France, i.e., under a system of control that allowed for relative local autonomy compared to the policy of direct rule in neighbouring Algeria. In reality, the Bey, sovereign of the Kingdom of Tunis, saw most of his power shift to the French General Resident. During the first decades of the Protectorate, French influence was strongly challenged by Italian ambitions, that country having long coveted Tunisian territory. Up until the 1930s, Italian residents outnumbered their French counterparts. The “Tunisian” society of the interwar period, where Tunisian Jews and Muslims, French, Italians and Maltese, and, to a lesser extent, Greeks and Russians, coexisted while rarely intermixing, has often been dubbed a “mosaic.” Refusing to exist as the silent majority,


Tunisians soon voiced demands. The national movement crystallized in 1920 with the creation of the Destour Party. Tensions between the “traditionalists” and the “modernists” resulted in the division of the movement in 1934 and in the creation of the Neo-Destour, which radicalized nationalist activities.3

By the end of the 1930s, radio and propaganda walked hand in hand. I argue that, despite severe restraints set up by French authorities, radio listening played its part in the socio-political changes of the time, whether directly (audiences easily subverted the media for their own purposes, including resistance), or indirectly (radio opened onto a wider world and brought new ways of life into cafés, barbershops, souks, and households). In this paper, I question the “national challenge” represented by the local radio, Radio-Tunis, during the war. I examine the influence of foreign broadcasting on the different populations of the country and the vain attempts of the colonial administration to control the audiences’ preferences. Finally, I look into audience growth during World War II and the characteristics of radio listening in Tunisia.4

The Voice of Tunisia?

Reflecting on the history of leisure in Africa, Charles Ambler proposes that radio is an original medium: “Radio was distinct among mass media in that in some sense its content might be defined as local.”5 Unlike the silver screen, which for the most part offered French, American and occasionally Egyptian films in Tunisia, airwaves were opened to local radio stations. Certainly, as Charles Ambler himself recognizes, radio served as a window on the world, spreading international news and foreign music. Nevertheless, with the creation of a radio station, Tunisia possessed a voice that could be heard throughout the country or even abroad. But for whom did this voice speak?

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