

A lesson learned quietly

By Larry Wilson, Editor, Pasadena Star News

TUESDAY – morning what I knew about Tunisia could have been summed up in the Charlie Parker/Dizzie Gillespie song "The cares of the day seem to vanish / The ending of day brings release / Each wonderful night in Tunisia / Where the nights are filled with peace.' But my calendar showed that four Tunisians would be arriving at my office at 2 p.m. as part of a trip arranged through the Los Angeles Visitors Council. They were staying in Pasadena at the Marriott; they had dined with Marcia and Paul Secord and been shown the moons of Jupiter through the telescope of former JPLer Ted Clarke.

I read a little on the Mediterranean/Saharan country, opened rather than discarded an e-mail from a dissident group holding a protest yesterday in front of the State Department timed to coincide with a visit from Tunisian President formerly President for Life Zine al Abidine Ben Ali.

OK, now I knew enough to sit down with them. I welcomed the elegantly dressed foursome: Khedija M'Bazaia, with a government committee on human rights; Jalel Lakdar, M.P.; lawyer Mohamed Jalali, M.P.; Zyed Krichen, editor in chief, Realites, a weekly news magazine; with their Sudanese interpreter, Hashim El-Tinay.

Hard-hitting journo that I am, I launched into the human-rights charges right away: "The totalitarian tactics of Ben Ali's police state have produced one of the most heavily self-censored presses in the region,' etc.

They listened quite politely. El-Tinay was an excellent, diligent translator, and such conversations take literally double-time. I began to see there would be no defensiveness here. I began to just listen.

Jalali: "Yes, you're right; there is a real problem in Tunisia, of liberties and freedom ... But in all objectivity, when the fundamentalists tried to wrest power from Ben Ali, this resulted in a reaction as is natural.'

Lakdar: "The middle ground is precisely the long-term goal of Tunisia to maintain our Arabic and Islamic identity, and at the same time to live in the modern world.'

Krichen: "Americans don't know that much about the rest of the world. And they tend to generalize is that because they choose not to know at the level of the root of things Overall, obviously the preoccupation of America after Sept. 11 is to protect its security. But ... our region has the right to our own strategies. It is as if we haven't that right, as if only America counts.'

Jalali: "The general perception in our region is that the U.S. is a very selfish country it pays lip service to liberty, but all that counts in the end is American interests, full stop. America's never done anything about the dictatorial regimes in our region so long as they served America's interest.'

Lakdar: "We would like to win you as a friend for liberty in Tunisia.'

A fellow can learn a lot if he just shuts up and listens.

– Larry Wilson is editor of the Pasadena Star-News. His column runs Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Write him at larry.wilson@sgvn.com.