



**TWO AMERICAN EDITORS**, Bob Sweeney of Denver (left) and Gene Johnson of Minnesota, listened as Habib ben Yahya, the Tunisian foreign minister, explained the back-

ground of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The veteran diplomat spent an hour talking with the editors, representing the National Newspaper Association. — Herald staff photos by Steve Haynes

# Veteran lived Mideast history

A conversation with Habib ben Yahya is like a college seminar in the history of Mideast diplomacy. In half a century of service to his country, Mr. ben Yahya has lived through nearly the entire history of the present conflict. He has seen his nation go from French colony to a prosperous and egalitarian, mostly middle class example for the rest of Africa.



## Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes  
schaynes@nwkansas.com

On couches and overstuffed chairs in the reception room at the Foreign Ministry, American editors listen to his recollections. It is one of those rooms where you see pictures of heads of state shaking hands, all gilt and marble and expensive rugs.

And he remembers clearly the initial United Nations Security Council resolution calling for the world to recognize two independent states in the former British protectorate known as Palestine.

Recognition of both Israel and a Palestinian state has always been Tunisian policy, he noted, though there has been a price to pay.

"In 1965," he said, "(former President) Habib Bourguiba visited Cairo to see (Egyptian President Gamal) Nasser.... He advised Arab countries to accept the partition plan of 1947-48 and recognize Israel.

"Our embassy in Cairo, sir, was burned down. Our embassy in Leba-

non was burned down. We were ready to quit the Arab League."

In the years since, Mr. ben Yahya has been a diplomat and bureaucrat, served as ambassador to the United States, been defense minister and, finally, foreign minister.

In recent years, he's helped negotiate an opening with neighboring Libya, which has accepted responsibility for its terrorist past and given up its nuclear weapons program.

He sees Tunisia as a historic and future friend of the U.S.

"Our relations are very solid," he says. "They go back two centuries, to 1797.

"The U.S. was the first country to recognize Tunisia independent (in 1956). The U.S. has backed Tunisian independence."

While his country has not endorsed the American invasion of Iraq, its stance has been moderate.

"Let me tell you," the minister says, "nobody in Tunisia shed any

tears for Saddam Hussein."

He said Tunisian President Zine ben Ali sent his prime minister to plead with Saddam to leave Kuwait before the Gulf War. Last year, Mr. ben Yahya was the last outside diplomat to see the dictator, urging him to abide by U.N. Security Council resolutions.

"Tunisia's concern is the fate of the Iraqi people," he said. "We would like to see Iraq as a united country. The balkanization of Iraq would be disastrous to the entire region."

He wishes America would take a more constant role in world affairs.

"American history is to be in isolation, then completely involved," he says. "The world is more complicated now than before the dissolution of the Soviet Union...."

"We know your country and the values in which you believe. We don't question your motives — you are trying to help — but you need a global approach."

The minister bristles at the mention of the official American line, which is that Tunisia needs to quicken the pace of its movement toward true democracy. Since independence, the country has been ruled by a single party, and two presidents, Bourguiba and ben Ali. There is opposition, but the president won his last election by 90 percent.

He said he had told Secretary of State Colin Powell that America has had more time to evolve.

"You have had 200 years," he said. "We are talking about only 15 years of democratization. Be patient with us."

The government has been busy with economic reforms and the drive to modernize Tunisia, he said. Democracy will come.

Still, he says, relations with the U.S. are smooth.

"There isn't any problem between the U.S. and Tunisia," he says, referring to the then-pending visit to Washington by President ben Ali. "We will be talking about the problems of others."

While terrorism has not been much of a problem in Tunisia, where government buildings are open and



**VETERAN DIPLOMAT** Habib ben Yahya reflected on his country's role in Mideast affairs.

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Please be sure to allow a couple of days' notice so we can arrange to be there.

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lightly guarded, a group aligned with al Qaida did attack one of the world's oldest synagogues in Jerba, an island south of Tunis.

Tunisians took that as an insult, the minister said.

"It is a symbol of our tolerance," he said. "That tolerance is an ingredient we need all over the world. We are talking about a more humane approach to the reuniting of all the sons of Abraham."

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