



BOSTON CONSORTIUM *for*
ARAB REGION STUDIES

Allyson Hawkins, BCARS Assistant Director
Denis Sullivan, BCARS Director



Citizenship in Context: Tunisia

The Boston Consortium *for* Arab Region Studies

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies has been releasing a series of bulletins examining how citizenship is located at the nexus of several overlapping issues related to displacement, human rights, and the role of civil society in the Arab Region.

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I. Citizenship in Context: Tunisia

While Tunisia's social and political transformation is often seen as a before and after of the 2010-2011 uprisings, its evolution and approach to social, economic, and cultural issues has been evolving for decades and continues to do so after the revolution that ousted Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. There is no doubt that the country has made great strides in further expanding, protecting, and re-imagining citizenship rights over the past decade, with the uprisings being a transformational pivot point. Specifically, Tunisia's progressive Personal Status Code was amended in 2010 to uphold the equal right of all citizens (more inclusive of but not equal for all genders) to confer nationality to their children at birth.

The 2014 Constitution goes further and explicitly promotes expanded human rights and further protects all citizens as it increases state recognition of personal rights. Another progressive legislative milestone was reached in October 2018 with a law criminalizing racial discrimination across the country. [1] This law further strengthened the groundwork laid by the Constitution to protect *all* of Tunisia's citizens. [2] Additionally, more than 90 organizations and civil society groups in Tunisia issued a Pact for Equality and Individual Freedoms in 2018, outlining the fundamental rights that all Tunisians should enjoy.



[1] Grewal, "In another first, Tunisia criminalizes racism."

[2] UNHCR, "Unequal Citizens."

Adopting a Code for Individual Freedoms and the Code for Equality recommended by the Commission for Individual Freedoms and Equality would be “the next logical step” to complete a trajectory of increasingly progressive laws Tunisia has passed.[3]

Echoing through these changes is the legacy of Tunisian history. Prior to the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011, Tunisian governments worked (on paper and in practice) to define Tunisian identity (narrowly and specifically) as “Arab” and “Muslim.” This marginalized religious minorities, sidelined the country’s indigenous Amazigh population, and had further repercussions in relation to gender, sexuality, ability, socio-economic class, and race.[4] In the aftermath of Ben Ali’s overthrow, the religious establishment in Tunisia remained strong and secured strategic Islamist electoral victories, demonstrating what Malika Zeghal classifies as a “broad and long-held agreement between Islamists and non-Islamists on the necessity of the state’s being ‘Muslim.’”[5] Therefore, despite the increased inclusivity and recognition of religious minorities in Tunisia present in the 2014 Constitution, the country continues to be developed and conceptualized as a democratic and Muslim state.[6]

This emphasis on Arab/Muslim identity, as well as other forms of discrimination amongst women and minorities, is grounded in Tunisia’s colonial legacy. Nationality laws that deny women equal right to confer nationality are “overwhelmingly the legacy of colonial rule, with newly independent states having modeled their nationality laws on those of the former colonial powers.”[7] Tunisia’s own colonial past helped it establish restrictive nationality strategies, wherein the rights of women and minorities were discriminated against in its nationality law. Tunisia’s nationality laws, therefore, were treated as a continuation or transposition of its former colonial power’s legal order. The continuing emphasis on Arab/Muslim identity in the post-colonial era carried on this tradition, and does not reflect the diversity of

Tunisia’s citizenry.[8] During Bourguiba’s and Ben Ali’s governments, this trend became further entrenched.

Today, the rights and protections outlined in the new Tunisian constitution seek to mitigate some of this legacy, with particular regard toward gender. However, “[t]he Tunisian constitution, like any constitution for that matter, not only serves to confer rights to citizens, but also entails some sort of closure that marginalizes or excludes certain narratives, identities, or claims of parts of ‘the people.’”[9]

The 2014 constitution, approved by the majority of Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly, recognizes and strives to uphold citizenship rights and is cause for celebration. Furthermore, Tunisia’s civil society has expanded and become more active in this arena post-revolution, working to raise awareness and secure legislative footholds protecting the rights of all of Tunisia’s citizens. However, as the “Tunisian people” attempt to re-conceptualize the country’s identity post-revolution, there must be less emphasis on homogeneity and unity and more concerted efforts to recognize and protect the various identities that make up the Tunisian citizenry. “The conflicts that still exist over what constitutes the Tunisian people and thus over what citizenship means are still ongoing, and it needs to be seen whether the constitution can serve as a platform to democratically engage with these conflicts or rather as a constraining framework making divergent claims impossible.”[10]

The next section uses an intersectional approach to consider the diverse identities of the Tunisian populace and how different groups enjoy or are deprived of particular citizenship rights. Despite the inclusive efforts of the new constitution, identity politics (religion, gender, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, race, ability) still play a role in how Tunisian citizens access and enjoy their rights.

[3] Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: Pact for Equality, Individual Freedom.”

[4] Quattrini, “Identity and Citizenship in Tunisia.”

[5] Zeghal, “Constitutionalizing a Democratic Muslim State without Shari’a,” 107.

[6] Ibid, 108.

[7] Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: Pact for Equality, Individual Freedom.”

[8] Perrin, “Struggles of Citizenship,” 231-232.

[9] Zemni, “The Tunisian Revolution,” 144.

[10] Ibid, 144.

II. Barriers to Equal Rights for all of Tunisia's Citizens

While Tunisia's populace is overwhelmingly Arab and Sunni Muslim, the fact that the Tunisian government has continuously promoted this Sunni Muslim image since its independence from colonial rule in 1956 obscures the country's diversity. The lack of official discourse on minorities and diversity, as well as a public education system centered around a narrowly defined Arab-Muslim identity, has resulted in minorities and indigenous people being treated, in some respects, as "secondary citizens" compared to their fellow Tunisians.[11]

Additionally, the fact that the country is geographically divided between the well-resourced, majority Arab-Muslim coastal areas and the under-resourced interior, which is also home to many of the country's minorities, means that the resources that help secure access to rights and prevent discrimination are not evenly distributed. This uneven distribution of resources overwhelmingly favors the Arab-Muslim majority. Despite these divides, "the people" of Tunisia united during the

2010-2011 revolution, coming together under a common cause, despite their heterogeneous experiences. Post-revolution, it is and will continue to be vital for the evolving legal and social orders to consider the diversity of the country and work to protect the rights of all citizens, despite their different identities.

Religion

Many sources indicate that between 98 and 99 percent of Tunisians are Sunni Muslim, but the lack of disaggregated data, as well as the lack of recognition for other religions outside of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism makes these numbers disputable. Outside of the three Abrahamic religions, religious minorities do exist in Tunisia, although little information, including population estimates, is available. Small communities of Baha'i, Sufis, and Atheists exist, however their status and access to rights, particularly rights to openly practice their faiths, is quite complex. Some religious communities fear that being labeled as a 'minority' will further jeopardize their access to citizenship rights, making securing protected status a fraught issue, which in turn makes learning more about the size of these communities even more challenging.

"While Tunisia's populace is overwhelmingly Arab and Sunni Muslim, the fact that the Tunisian government has continuously promoted this image since its independence from colonial rule in 1956 obscures the country's diversity."

[11] Quattrini, 4.

While the right to freedom of religion is enshrined in the Tunisian constitution, the only ‘religious minorities’ currently recognized are Christians and Jews, making the ability to exercise religious freedoms for other religious minorities, although not officially recognized as such, even more challenging. For example, religious minorities outside of Christians and Jews face significant challenges in freely practicing certain aspects of their faiths. Additionally, “pre-revolutionary legislation on apostasy is also still used to penalize Tunisians who have chosen to convert to Christianity or identify as atheist.”[12] Marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims (particularly between Muslim women and non-Muslim men) also remain a point of contention; while there is no law against it, many local bodies choose to ban these marriages and refuse to formally recognize them.[13]

Harassment, threats, and attacks do occur against religious minorities in Tunisia. Indirect restrictions preventing groups from registering as national associations or receiving public funds also continue. In response to this status quo, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, in his preliminary findings from an April 2018 report, stressed the importance of reconciling certain existing laws with the 2014 constitution in order to better extend the right of religious freedom for all of Tunisia’s citizens.[14] While further reforms are on the horizon, Tunisian lawmakers should continue to push for the removal or amendment of any legislation that restricts freedom of religion and belief amongst Tunisia’s religious communities.

Ethnicity

Despite Tunisia’s legislative progress, some of Tunisia’s pre-2011 legislation continues to influence the human rights environment today, as can be seen with the Amazigh, Tunisia’s indigenous population. The Amazigh are an ethnic group generally residing in the impoverished south of the country, a geographic inequality that further reinforces their

marginalization.[15] Two pieces of legislation in particular negatively impact the Amazigh population’s access to rights.

Notably, the 2014 constitution makes no mention of the Amazigh community and does not guarantee indigenous rights (either generally or specifically to the Amazigh population). Post-revolution, the Amazigh have no representatives in the new National Constituent Assembly (NCA), and interviews with members of the NCA reveal a less than favorable perception of minority rights in the country. Modernists in Tunisia’s new government have defended Tunisia’s pluralist identity; however, “it is noteworthy that the establishment of a body for minorities was never mentioned amongst the 30 or so bodies that were proposed to the Commission of Constitutional Bodies,” which is purported to represent almost the entire political spectrum within Tunisia’s NCA.[16] Furthermore, Decree Law no. 59-33, which came into effect in 1959 and is still valid today, prohibits the use of “names that do not have an Arabic root, unless they have a long established usage in the Maghreb.”[17] In recent years, there have been several cases of people who have attempted to register children with Amazigh names but were prevented from doing so. This legislation challenges the cultural expression and rights of the Amazigh population as citizens of Tunisia. These issues are the tip of the iceberg of the systemic discrimination that the Amazigh population faces throughout the country.



[12] Quattrini, 2.

[13] Ibid, 9.

[14] Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur.”

[15] González, “A timid Amazigh awakening in Tunisia.”

[16] Redissi and Boukhayatia, “The National Constituent Assembly,” 14.

[17] Quattrini, 10.

The Tunisian government holds the position that the Amazigh, while representing the country's indigenous population, "do not form a minority asserting its specific character since they are citizens who are fully and completely integrated into the social fabric." [18] Furthermore, in response to the list of issues to be taken up in connection with its obligations relating to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (of which Tunisia is a signatory), the Tunisian government proclaims:

"Tunisia's original ethnicity is Berber [Amazigh]. Its population has, however, assimilated groups from elsewhere. No attempt has ever been made in Tunisia to assert rights belonging to a specific category. Unlike in other countries, there is no such thing as an ethnic minority in Tunisia. It is surprising that a question of this kind should be raised in relation to a country that is ethnically integrated.

While confirming its commitment to protect minorities all over the world in accordance with international law, Tunisia wishes to point out that it is important to look at real situations, not invent situations in response to activism that is of no relevance in this country." [19]

This is counter to Tunisia's obligation relating to Article 27 of the Covenant, which requires the government to uphold the rights of ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities to enjoy their own cultures, profess and practice their own religions, and to use their own language. Therefore Tunisia, in its legal suppression of Amazigh rights, is at odds with its international obligations. One Amazigh perspective reflects this tension. "Most Amazigh, since they are an indigenous people, do not wish to be labeled as a minority and some instead use the French expression *groupe minorisé*, meaning a group that has been 'minoritized.'" [20] Regardless of whether or not they are labeled as a minority, or an indigenous population, the Amazigh remain marginalized and

face considerable pressure to conceal their language, culture, and traditional practices in modern Tunisian society. This presents challenges to securing gainful employment and social acceptance. Therefore, while some celebrate the constitution as extending and strengthening human rights protections across the country, this progress does not extend to Tunisia's indigenous population, who are patently excluded.

Gender

While it is beyond the scope of this Bulletin to outline all the legislative successes and failures of the Tunisian government in pursuing gender equality, several key areas are particularly relevant to the conversation around citizenship rights and gender parity. Key legal documents relating to gender equality include the 1956 Personal Status Code, the Tunisian Penal Code, the Code of Tunisian Nationality, and the 2014 Constitution.

The 1956 Personal Status Code (CPS) laid the groundwork for many of the post-revolutionary steps taken to further enshrine gender equality in Tunisian legislation. Concerned primarily with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, alimony, child custody, and adoption, the Code attempted to establish equality between men and women in a number of areas. The CPS outlawed repudiation and polygamy, established a minimum age for the marriage of girls, and ensured the right to equal wages for men and women. The CPS was amended in 1993, giving wives increased rights to transfer nationality to children [see below, Nationality Code]; it also outlined new mutual obligations for husbands and wives as well as norms around domestic violence. [21] The ethos behind the CPS was further strengthened throughout the drafting process of the new Tunisian constitution. "Following the release of the draft of the constitution on 13 August 2012, several articles came under public scrutiny. Women activists and their male allies paid special attention to Article 28, which some regarded as compromising gender

[18] Quattrini, 11.

[19] UN Human Rights Committee, "Replies of the Tunisian Government," 34.

[20] Quattrini, 19.

[21] Watts, "The Impact on Women," 3.

equality because the article defined women as ‘complementary’ to men.”[22] Petitions were written and coalitions formed denouncing the article, specifically saying it denied women’s rights to be full-fledged citizens.[23] Ultimately, the constitution adopted Article 21 on gender equality, stating “[a]ll citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination.”[24] However, while formally enshrined in Tunisian law, women still face challenges in accessing their equal rights as Tunisian citizens on many fronts.

In the original Nationality Code of 1963, only Tunisian men could automatically confer their nationality on children without condition. Women lacked this right, and could only confer nationality on their children at birth if the child was born in the state territory, or if the father was unknown, stateless, or of unknown nationality.[25] This caused many hardships for Tunisian women, and also denied their children equal access to rights and services.

“In order to address the harm caused by the law, the Code went through several rounds of revisions. In 1993, the Nationality Code was amended to permit the child of a Tunisian woman and foreign father to acquire nationality in the year prior to reaching maturity, through the submission of a written request by the child’s father and mother. Then in 2002, this provision was further amended to permit such children to acquire nationality through a statement by the mother alone, if the father was deceased, had abandoned the family, or was considered incapacitated.”[26]

As the national movement for women’s equal nationality rights grew in Tunisia, they continued to advocate for reforms, which resulted in further amendments to the law in 2010. New legislation now upholds the equal right of all citizens, regardless of gender, to confer nationality on their children at birth.[27]

“The draft law was presented as the embodiment of Tunisia’s Constitutional commitment to uphold women and men as equal citizens, with the ability to confer nationality recognized as a core component of citizenship. The reform was also upheld as a positive step to bring Tunisia’s legislation in line with its commitments under international law, and coincided with the lifting of the country’s reservation to Article 9 to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.”[28]

While progressive compared to the citizenship rights women hold in other countries around the world, and in MENA countries specifically, restrictions on women’s citizenship rights in Tunisia still remain. While the constitution established that it was the responsibility of the state to support women’s rights, and since 2014 laws and mechanisms have been enacted to support this goal, there remains a gap between theory and practice.[29] Many women still face difficult economic and social marginalization, particularly in rural parts of Tunisia. Additionally, equality in inheritance is still a hotly debated issue. The Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee (COLIBE), created by the Tunisian president to activate the provisions of equality stipulated by the constitution, continues to push for reform on this issue, although the proposed law lets Tunisian families choose whether to implement equality in inheritance or not, skirting the state’s duty to uphold this right for its women citizens.[30] Issues of gender-based violence and equal access to justice mechanisms require further scrutiny, despite the huge gains made for women in the realms of education, political representation, and family law.

A key challenge is giving “teeth” to the legislation and making it actionable through funding. Additionally, challenges around conflicting notions of women’s role in society (politically played out between the Islamist and secular stances of

[22] Charrad and Zarrugh, “Equal or Complementary?” 234-235.

[23] Ibid, 239.

[24] Government of Tunisia, “Tunisia Constitution of 2014.”

[25] UNHCR, 11.

[26] UNHCR, 11.

[27] Ibid, 12.

[28] Ibid, 12.

[29] Jobrane, “Bridging the Gap.”

[30] Ibid.

Tunisia's two largest political parties, *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounes* respectively), as well as a police force that does not consistently uphold protections for women citizens,[31] signal that there lies a long road ahead to achieve in practice the equality for Tunisian women that formally exists on paper.

Socio-economic Class

Great economic disparity exists across Tunisia, and intersects uniquely with the country's geography. The bulk of investment and infrastructure development has been concentrated on Tunisia's coastal areas and in its northern capital. In contrast, the interior, south, and west of the country have seen very little development. This interior or peripheral space is also where the majority of Tunisia's marginalized communities reside. In attempts to combat this economic inequality and find employment, many are forced to migrate from the periphery to urban centers, a process that can lead to an "attrition of their traditions and beliefs." [32]

Demands from protesters make it clear that employment and inclusion are both priorities

"The power of the nationwide cross-class mobilizations also injected the socio-economic grievances with more politicized themes touching upon citizenship issues and a 'demand of state.' When protesters from all classes and social backgrounds shouted *al-tachgil istishaq ya isabat as-sorraq* (Work is a right, o you gang of thieves) they were not solely referring to the failing labor market and high unemployment, they were also voicing 'a demand seeking inclusion, well-being and/or protection.'" [33]



While the revolution united people across these geographical and socio-economic boundaries, the post-revolutionary reality is that the demands of these groups are more diverse than their unified front during the revolution might have appeared. While the overall human rights situation in Tunisia has improved, the reach of those rights often does not cross these geographical and socio-economic lines. Increased investment in infrastructure and creation of employment

[31] Bailey, "One Year Ago."

[32] Quattrini, 6.

[33] Zemni, 133.

opportunities in Tunisia's interior and south will help further extend rights – and dignity – to more of the country's citizenry, but it must be a deliberate effort.

Sexual Orientation

Legislation in Tunisia still actively discriminates against the country's LGBTQ communities. Article 230 of the penal code punishes consensual same-sex relations with up to three years in prison, and Tunisian law also punishes acts the authorities perceive as contrary to "morality" and "decency." [34] In 2017, Tunisian authorities committed to ending anal examinations as evidence in homosexuality prosecutions. In practice, Tunisian courts continue to order these examinations, which many international human rights groups have condemned as torture. Human Rights Watch reports that "[u]nchecked discrimination prevents LGBT people from enjoying their most basic rights to health, education, work, and to seek legal action against abusers." [35] Amidst these changes and debate, COLIBE is pushing for legislative reform from within, but lack of political will threatens progress. However, Tunisia's increasingly visible and effective LGBTQ civil society hopes to accompany potential legislative reform with increased visibility and awareness around these issues. "Key successes for the LGBTQ movement range from the effective use of the United Nations human rights mechanisms to apply pressure on the Tunisian government, to utilizing art as a means [of] changing mindsets of the broader public." [36]

Tunisian activists note, however, that many challenges remain for LGBTQ individuals. Discriminatory laws and the use of anal testing persist. Hate crimes and societal discrimination also remain concerns. Arrests—often solely on the basis of non-normative gender expression—continue, and the state continually attempts to silence groups condemning discrimination against Tunisia's LGBTQ community. The dialogue established between Tunisian LGBTQ organizations and

COLIBE offers a promising foundation for future reforms, but progress in protecting the basic human rights of Tunisia's LGBTQ citizens remains slow.

Race

Black Tunisians, an estimated 10-15 percent of Tunisia's total population, face considerable discrimination, even after the passing of the "Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination" in October 2018. The law, a major legislative milestone, was meant to discourage discrimination and encourage Black Tunisians to seek justice in cases that might have previously been ignored. [37] Many Black Tunisians view this legislation as only the first step in what has been and will be a long process of securing full access to their citizenship rights.

“The rigidity of color-blind de-minoritization policies that professed to enshrine full citizenship and suppress the memory of slavery neither washed away the stigma of slavery nor rendered black Tunisians equal to the majority.”

[34] Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: End the Persecution of LGBT People."

[35] Ibid.

[36] Girijashanker, "Spring for LGBT Rights."

[37] Quattrini, 21.



Both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes perpetuated what Afifa Ltifi calls “state sponsored de-minoritization policies” in efforts to homogenize the nation. “The rigidity of color-blind national policies that professed to enshrine full citizenship and suppress the memory of slavery,” she writes, “neither washed away the stigma of slavery nor rendered black Tunisians equal to the majority.”[38] This stigma persists today, and manifests in several ways. In general, Black Tunisians suffer from widespread poverty, exclusion from the job market, and limited access to higher education. They are also largely absent from public life, lacking representation in both politics and the media. Taboos around mixed marriages also persist, and Black Tunisians are regularly subject to harassment and violence. Therefore, while the 2018 law represents a solid legislative foundation for protection against racial discrimination for Black Tunisians, a “cultural revolution” that will eliminate both public and subversive forms of discrimination must also accompany it.

Ability

Naturalization laws throughout the MENA region contain criteria requiring that an individual should be mentally, and sometimes also physically, fit to secure naturalization.[39] Discriminatory conditions relating to mental and physical health can also lead to the deprivation of nationality. The Tunisian Nationality Code[40] states that applicants for naturalization may not have a “physical state making them a burden or danger to the community,” a clause that can be interpreted to the detriment of persons with disabilities and used to prevent the naturalization of individuals who, according to the state, do not meet this nebulous criteria.[41] As van Waas and Al Barazi note, “given that equal enjoyment of the right to nationality for persons with disabilities is clearly established under international law, the fact that at least five MENA countries (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Syria, and Tunisia) maintain legislation that could be interpreted to bar persons from disabilities from naturalization is of serious concern.”[42]

[38] Ltifi, “Black Tunisians and the Pitfalls.”

[39] Al Barazi, “Regional Report on Citizenship,” 14.

[40] See Tunisian Nationality Code, Article 23(4), Decree No. 63-6, 1963.

[41] van Waas and Al Barazi, “A Comparative Analysis of Nationality Laws,” 12.

[42] Ibid, 27.

III. Recommendations and Ways Forward

“The conflicts that still exist over *what constitutes the Tunisian people* and thus over *what citizenship means* are still ongoing, and it needs to be seen whether the constitution can serve as a platform to democratically engage with these conflicts or rather as a constraining framework making divergent claims impossible.”[43]

As this Bulletin demonstrates, the Tunisian populace is diverse and its citizenry faces unique challenges in accessing and enjoying their citizenship rights.

“Securing full citizenship for all Tunisians and celebrating the country’s diversity are essential elements in its future stability and social cohesion: this will require not only governmental efforts,

but the broader engagement of schools, media, judiciary, executive bodies and civil society, including Tunisia’s majority communities.”[44]



The government, as it continues to implement legislative changes in post-revolutionary Tunisia, must continue to confront the discrimination that still exists throughout its own country. Specifically, the Tunisian government should:

- Uphold and expand the exercise of the “Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination”
- Adopt the Code of Individual Freedoms (a series of recommendations from the Tunisian Civil Coalition for Individual Freedoms) which would “provide for the decriminalization of homosexual acts and a rights-respecting process by which trans people could change their sex marker on legal documents”[45]
- Put the ethos of Article 21 of the constitution (“All citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination”) into more actionable practice that expands women’s rights as citizens, particularly around the equal conferral of nationality, inheritance law, protections against gender-based violence, and access to justice mechanisms.

A key step in the implementation of the above recommendations would be to ensure that these initiatives extend to all parts of Tunisia. A stronger emphasis on implementing these changes – not only in the coastal and wealthy areas of the country, but in the interior and economically marginalized areas as well – will be critical to the success of securing greater rights for all of Tunisia’s citizens.

[43] Zemni, 144 (emphasis added).

[44] Quattrini, 4.

[45] Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: End the Persecution.”

For more information about this Bulletin or BCARS, please contact:

Allyson Hawkins

BCARS Assistant Director

a.hawkins@northeastern.edu

Photos provided by:

Allyson Hawkins

Special thanks to:

Noor Dughri, for her insights and editing

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