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ISLAMISM AND SALAFISM IN TUNISIA AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

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ISLAMISM AND SALAFISM IN TUNISIA AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Interview with Professor Alaya Allani, historian and researcher on Islamism in the Maghreb, August 2012.

1) What are the characteristics of the Salafist landscape in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali; parties and associations like Ansar al Shari'aa etc?

Salafism in its contemporary version as a political movement existed in the times of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, but it was repressed. In 1992, there were lawsuits filed against 150 Salafis. During the time of Ben Ali, thousands of Ennahda Islamists and hundreds of Salafists were put on trial.

After the 14 January 2011 revolution, the Salafist landscape in Tunisia is currently composed of 3 political parties and several associations of Salafist persuasion.

With respect to the political parties, one finds the Islah party chaired by Mr Mohamed Khoudja, the former head of the Tunisian FIS in the early 90s (in 1990 Khoja was a founding member of the Tunisian Islamic Salvation Front, similar to the Algerian FIS); the Authenticity party (the Al Asala party) led by Mouldi Moujahed; and the Party of Mercy (Arrahma Party), legalised on July 31, 2012, and chaired by Saïd Al Jaziri, a Tunisian living abroad who had lived for some years in Canada.

As for the associations, there are many, the most important are cited (below)

- o Ansar Al shari'a أنصار الشريعة (supporters of Sharia) chaired by Abou Yadh, the powerful leader of Salafist Jihadism in Tunisia.
- o The Centrist Association of Awareness and Reform (Al Jamaa al wassatia Li Tawiaa wal Islah الجمعية الوسطية للتوعية والإصلاح) chaired by El Almi, what may be thought of as the religious police.

In Tunisia, there are currently two main Salafist tendencies: Salafist Reformism (or Salafiyya Ilmyya) and Salafist Jihadism.

- o The Salafist Reformists or "scientific" (Salafists), which are the majority, renounce violence but refuse democracy and insist on the implementation of Shari'a
- o The Salafist jihadists, who essentially come together under the Association "Ansar al-Sharia", are an active group that continue to grow.

With the Arab Spring revolutions, the Salafist movement in Tunisia has grown. Firstly, all the prisoners of the movement and of other Islamist parties were released. An alliance began to develop between Ennahda and the Salafists.

This special relationship between the two movements was reinforced after the 23 October 2011 elections. Moreover, the Troika government, headed by Ennahda, continues to repeat that the Salafists have the right to express themselves and organise politically.

Three political parties have been legalised so far: “Hizb Al-Asala” (the Authenticity party), “Jabhat Al-Islah” (the Reform Front) and a third radical Islamic party, which recently obtained its official permission, known as “Hizb Attahrir”, the Liberation Party. The spokesman of the party, just days after its legalisation in July 2012, declared that it was against democracy and the republican regime. He called, moreover, for a return to the Caliphate.

It is worth noting, that these three Salafist parties constitute only a small minority of the movement (almost 10% of the total number of Salafists).

The Salafist majority are currently content to simply do community work and they stand to benefit from this type of activity. The possibility of support from the Salafist movement for the Ennahda party in the upcoming 2013 elections is becoming a quasi certainty.

For Ennahda, the regular meeting with the leaders of this movement sets the ground for a possible Salafist-Ennahda alliance in the medium-term.

Concerning the main Salafist leaders in Tunisia that have emerged after the Arab Spring, we highlight the following:

- **Khatib Al Idrissi**, originally from Sidi Bouzid, born in 1956, an ex-nurse; he lived for some years in Saudi Arabia. He was tried during the time of Ben Ali in the case of Soliman in early 2007. He is considered the theoretician of the Salafist Jihadist movement in Tunisia.
- **Abou Yadh**, (whose real name is Seifallah Ben Hassine), was born in 1966. He lived for years in Great Britain and Afghanistan. He was sentenced in 2003, in the time of Ben Ali, with a heavy penalty of 43 years in prison. He was freed after the revolution. Abou Yadh's branch of jihadism focuses on the application of Shari'a and does not hide his sympathy for al-Qaeda.
- **Bechir Ben Hassan**, born in 1973, he is a leader of Scientific Salafism (salafyya Ilmyya سلفية علمية), originally from Msaken (a governorate of Sousse). He studied theology at the Saudi university “Om Al Kora” in Mecca جامعة أم القرى. He is known for his uncompromising religious interpretations inspired by the Wahhabi doctrine. In a recent video on youtube, Bechir Ben Hassan recommends that women do not travel alone between Tunis and Sousse (140km), without a male guardian (called a Mahram in Arabic).
- **Adel El Almi**, known as the founder of the religious police, warns, during the month of Ramadan (in July and August 2012), “restaurants and cafes that welcome or serve non-fasters during the hours of fasting.” (Webdo.tn le 17-07-2012)

2) What is the influence of Salafist groups on Tunisian society? Can you identify the social classes or geographical zones, in which the Salafists are present? In other words, do you see the Salafist groups emerging as a form of social activism or an elitist movement?

In short, the Sunni Wahhabi trend in Tunisia called for jihad against the infidels “Kouffar” and the rigorous application of Shari'a. Supporters are found in popular neighbourhoods, close to the underprivileged social classes. They are mostly young people with limited education. The Salafist Jihadists are currently based in the north of the capital, Bizerte, Jendouba, Kairouan, Mehdiya, Sousse, Sfax, Tozeur, and Djerba Medenine.

Before the Tunisian revolution, the jihadists were in the hundreds. Today, the number is estimated at thousands (between 7000 and 9000 people). The Salafi Reformists represent around 20.000 people.

In May 2012, the group “Ansar al-Shari’a” headed by Abou Yadh held a mass meeting in Kairouan. In this meeting, the leader discussed religion and a political-economic program (Islamic tourism, segregated clinics and schools for men and women, Islamic banks, Islamic unions etc).

There is talk now of the politicisation of Salafist Islam (Salafism, traditionally, was for centuries apolitical). Today, discussions are taking place behind the scenes among the North African Salafist movements about the creation of an International Salafist movement resembling the international Muslim Brotherhood.

The Salafists, in all the countries in the Maghreb that I have visited recently, find in the Egyptian case of Hizb Annour, a model to follow.

The association “Ansar al-Shari’a” in Tunisia attracts the majority of Salafist Jihadists and controls a good number of mosques, many located in the major cities of the country.

3) La Manouba is described as one of the Salafist centres on the social level. Is the presence of Salafist elements in la Manouba truly important?

The case of Salafism at the Faculty of Manouba is related to the security vulnerability that has ruled the country at the beginning of the academic year 2011-2012. The students wearing the niqab want to impose their laws on others. The Scientific Council of the Faculty, and for educational reasons, refused to accept the wearing of the niqab during lessons and exams. The Salafist oppose such measures and have been organising sit-ins. They have carried out violent actions which have stopped all classes for two months. The Supervisory Ministry refused to publish a circular banning the niqab, encouraging the Salafists to harden their attitudes. Most surprising is that the Prosecutor has decided to indict the Dean of the Faculty of Manouba, Habib Kazdaghli, following a complaint lodged against him by a Salafi student, who claimed that she had been assaulted by the Dean, which is totally false.

4) The presence of Salafism reveals an intra-Islamic confrontation between al-Nahda and the more radical and anti-system movements. With the birth of al-Islah party, can one speak of a same sort of division within the Salafist scene itself?

Al-Islah Front and other legalised Salafist parties make up only 10% of the Salafist movement. It is worth noting that the contradictions between the Salafists and Ennahda are secondary. (Note that half of the supporters of Ennahda are very close to the Salafi reformist thought). This explains why Ennahda avoids entering a confrontation with the Salafists despite their repeated violations of the law (attacks against bars, restaurants and hotels). Ennahda sees in the Salafist movement an ally during difficult times and mass electoral potential.

5) Is it true that approximately 10% of mosques in the country were in the hands of the Salafi preachers?

Tunisia has 4860 mosques, of which nearly 8% are under Salafi control. The Ministry of Religious Affairs does not currently have a firm grip over all the mosques. This explains the willingness of Ennahda to find an amicable solution with the Salafists. Salafi Imams have been appointed and others will follow. The latest statements by Rachid Ghannouchi and the Prime Minister, Hamadi Jebali, have insisted on the fact that the Salafists have the right to express themselves and organise themselves, as well as on the necessity of open dialogue with them.

Ennahda believes that the integration of the Salafists into political life will help soften their positions and rationalise the movement.

However, what happened during the month of Ramadan (July – August 2012) in some Tunisian cities raised concerns about the credibility of this approach of rationalisation of the Salafist phenomenon. Adel Almi, a hardline salafist, group called “The Association of Preaching and Reform” published at the beginning of Ramadan a manifesto warning restaurant and café owners who remain open during Ramadan. The Arabic daily newspaper, “Al Chourouk” on July 22, 2012, spoke of Salafi attacks against cafes and restaurants that were open during the day during Ramadan. The French newspaper “Le Monde” describes, in its issue of 25 July 2012, “the walls are covered in Islamic graffiti calling for jihad, threatening with death those who insult with words or acts, God or his prophet. On the beaches, Tunisians who dare to swim in bikinis can be counted on the fingers.”

In accordance with its strategy to foster a close relationship with the Salafists, Ennahda filed a law proposal at the Constituent Assembly on August 2nd, 2012, related to the criminalisation of the violation of the sacred. The text stipulates “whoever will have infringed the sacred in any manner whatsoever whether it be through speech, act or image is passable of a punishment of 2 years of prison and a fine of 2000 Dinars” (i.e. 1000 Euros). (See Le Temps, 3rd of August 2012). The opposition severely criticised this project and has asked for profound rectifications.

6) What are the Strategies and Political Objectives of the Salafist Movement?

The strategy of the Islamists in general is the Islamization of society. For Ennahda, this Islamisation is done from bottom to top. For Hizb Ettahrir, it is done from top to bottom (implicitly through a coup d'état). Moreover, the goal of the Islamists, is the creation of an Islamic state based on Shari'a. If Nahdaouis believe that the state will be created in the medium-term, the Salafists want it immediately.

7) Is it possible for you to categorise the Salafist movement in Tunisia such that al-Islah is a systemic movement that sticks to Tarbiyya, whereas the AST is almost like a jihadist movement? If yes, can we identify a new form of moderate jihad?

As I already mentioned, there are two major Salafist trends:

- o The Salafist Reformists who belong to the Party “El Islah Front”, “Al Asala” Party and the “Party of Mercy”. They reject violence and give great importance to ‘Tarbiyya’. They also suggest an Islamic state based on Wahhabi standards. The Salafist reformist trend is considered a reliable ally of Ennahda.
- o The Salafist Jihadists consider jihad a duty, they believe that evil c.a.d. “El Mounkar” would be defeated by force and not just mere words. Jihad in this trend is not just limited to the

Tunisian territory. It is also directed to foreign countries. In this context, Tunisian jihadists participated in the Syrian war. We cannot talk about moderate jihadists and others that are not moderate, but we can speak of independent jihadists and jihadists affiliated with al Qaeda (AQIM).