WORKSHOP 2

Conflicting representations of the Tunisian woman in the 21st century and the potential impact of a new Islamic feminist movement[1]

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[1] Note: The major portion of this paper and the fieldwork was completed prior to the events of January 2011 in Tunisia. A postscript has been added, knowing that the political situation remains uncertain and may impact our findings and conclusions.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, particularly since the first Gulf War in the mid 1990s, the "veil" or "headscarf" has reappeared in public space and has become associated with as a symbol of a rising tide of conservative religious behavior in Tunisia, long considered a secular nation-state and the standard-bearer for the emancipated woman in the Arab-Muslim world. Does this new phenomenon that increasingly appears in the streets of metropolitan Tunis and its suburbs signal a reconfiguration of women's presence in public and private space? Does this new trend suggest that a new women's movement, similar to Islamic feminist movements in the MENA region, has found a voice among women in Tunisia which might threaten the revered *Code of Personal Status*? Or, is this wearing of the headscarf linked to something very different that could lead to very different outcomes? These questions are very much on the minds of Tunisians today, young and old.

Our paper explores these questions on two levels through: (1) an examination of Tunisia's past political and socio-economic events and conditions, through December 2010, and (2) an analysis of the current voices of Tunisians, young and old, male and female, some ardent feminists, others not, gathered in a series of semi-structured interviews in 2007 and 2010 (six months before the Jasmine Revolution). The information gleaned from these interviews is interwoven through the historical analysis, leading to our conclusion: the rising tide of a more conservative behavior within traditionally secular Tunisia is linked to present-day challenges and global developments, not necessarily to a past religiously framed government or a deep-rooted public practice of Islam, making a faith-based movement, such as Islamic feminism, seemingly illusive at the time of this investigation.

In recent years, particularly since the first Gulf War in the mid 1990s, the "veil" or Islamist "headscarf" has reappeared in public space and has become associated with a rising tide of conservative religious behavior in Tunisia, long considered a secular nation-state and the standard-bearer for the emancipated woman in the Arab-Muslim world.[2] Does this new phenomenon that increasingly appears in the streets of metropolitan Tunis and its suburbs as well as throughout the country signal a reconfiguration of women's presence in public and private space? Does the re-emergence of the veil in a country in which its former president, Habib Bourguiba, removed it from the head of a young Tunisian woman in a dramatic gesture in 1956 signifying her legal presence in public life,[3] suggest that a new women's movement similar to Islamic feminist movements in the MENA region has found a voice among women in Tunisia? Or, is this wearing of the headscarf linked to a more worrisome trend that has little or no connection to Islamic feminists' efforts in redefining the role of women in Muslim societies from a female religious interpretation, but rather is a reactionary behavior that seems to have no core impetus and framework, and consequently no clear positive outcome for the Tunisian woman and the broader Tunisian citizenry?

These questions are very much on the minds of Tunisians today, particularly the Tunisian intellectual elite,[4] who in the past fifty years, have worked to promote and guarantee the active role of women in Tunisia life accorded them in the first secular, legal statute in the MENA region, the *Code of Personal Status* over fifty years ago.[5] Tunisian women have since equaled and in some instances, surpassed men in educational attainment and professional employment,[6] which is not generally the case for other MENA countries and, as a result, has influenced the target objective and shaped the future promises of Islamic feminist movements in the region. In Tunisia, is the visible return to a more conservative appearance of women borne from similar motivations and understood in the same way? In the following paper, we

[2] Also referred to as "hijab" (Arabic). In this paper, the term *veil*, *hijab*, and *headscarf* are used interchangeably to describe the same head covering typically worn in Tunisia; a head covering gently wrapped around the head and covering the hair, leaving the face visible.

[3] Bourguiba described the hijab as "an odious rag" that was but a hindrance to women's emancipation and to the country's development (reported by Daniel Williams in "Tunisia Veil Case Threatens 'Odious Rag'Struggle").

[4] Personal communications: I. Al-Gharbi, 7 July 2007; H. Redissi, 24 June 2010; A. Smaoui, 28 June 2010.

[5] For further comment, see Grami, A., "Onward to a Modern Islam." in *Quantera.de*

[6] For more in depth discussion on development indicators, see the *Arab Human Development Report* 2009 and the *National Union of Tunisian Women* (UNFT).

explored this very question by examining how Tunisia's unique past —grounded in historical, political, and socio-economic events and conditions—could give way to a voluntary and self-imposed religiosity. At the same time, we include current reaction to the more publicly visible conservative behavior through an analysis of a series of interviews conducted in 2007 and 2010 with Tunisian citizens, who range in age from 18-80 and are of various backgrounds and lived experiences.

The information gleaned from these interviews is interwoven in this paper with the important political and social events of the time and suggests the following: the rising tide of a more conservative behavior or appearance within the traditionally secular Tunisian society—particularly among the younger generation of men and women—is linked to present-day challenges and global developments, not necessarily to a past religiously framed government or a deep-rooted Islamic practice in public, making a faith-based movement, such as Islamic feminism illusive. The conclusion rendered, as a result of such analyses, suggests that the general concept of an "Islamic feminism" movement and its future presence in Tunisia is clouded in the uncertainty of what Margot Badran has described in her newest book, *Feminism in Islam*, as the factors of "time and space" in evolving social movements.

Milestones and challenges for Tunisian women in the 20th century—toggling between values and traditions of East and West

Modern Tunisia, formerly a French protectorate (1881-1956), has not been solely influenced by western thought, traditions, and ways of life. Tunisia is a mixture, a blend of different cultures and civilizations as well as religions. Carthage, 16 km from the capital city, Tunis, was founded in 814 B.C., by Elyssa, a Phoenician princess from Tyr also known as Dido, who became the first queen of Carthage. Carthage played a very important role in the history of North Africa; its geographic and military position made exchanges with the oriental and western world easy. Nonetheless, for three and a half centuries, Carthage had to give monies and offerings to Tyr (Julien 2003). In 146 B.C., Punic Carthage was pillaged by the Romans. Despite these events, a study of the ancient history of Tunisia shows that women worked in several sectors and were significant contributors to the economic development of their country land. Following the Phoenicians and Roman invasions, Tunisia was subjected to incursions of the Arabs (most notable Uqba ibn Naf in 660 A.D.), the Ottoman Turks, and lastly, the Europeans. Tunisia was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for more than three centuries (1574-1881), and traces of the Beylical structure continued

throughout the French colonial period (1881-1956). Hence, by the early twentieth century, having a simultaneous presence of East-West thought in this North African society was the norm, not the exception.

Islam, first introduced in the late seventh century in North Africa and gradually adopted by the native Berber population, was fortified by the presence of theologians at the famed Al-Zaytuna University.[7] According to feminist historian Ilhem Marzouki, it was in the 1920s that questions of the women's *hijab* first entered the arena of public debate.[8] It was frequently criticized by the French as "unfair and a stumbling block in the way of social progress."[9] It seemed that East-West thought may have come to loggerheads. Religious scholars at Al-Zaytuna University considered the attack on the *hijab* tantamount to attacking Islam, and worked to undermine the French stance.[10] It was one of the reasons that prompted Tunisian women, many of whom were later the pioneer feminists of their generation, to align themselves first to the nationalist cause, thereby putting aside their feminist agenda for a later time. This group of female (and male) activists used the *hijab* issue in their struggle for independence. By wearing it, Tunisian women differentiated themselves from their colonizers, a gesture that became an intentional political gesture.

There were, however, supporters among the Tunisian population who agreed with the French, as evident in the organization of a symposium on January 14, 1924 titled, "Pro or against the feminist movement," and led by the cultural secularist society Al-Taraqqi. Manoubia Al-Wartani, a woman with French cultural leanings, entered the gathering, ascended to the platform, her face unveiled, reminiscent of the actions of Huda Sha'rawi and Safuyyah Zaghul several years before in Egypt. A similar symposium, with the same title, took place on January 8, 1929. Habiba Al-Minshari delivered a speech on "Muslim Women of the Future-For or Against the Veil." Unveiled, she spoke about the Tunisian girl who covers her whole body with the *hijab*, while the French women live freely and unrestricted. Setting aside the comparative analysis of cultural inequity—i.e., the fact that a woman in one

[7] Most historians believe Aghlabid Ez-Zitouna Mosque ("Mosque of the Olive") was built in 723 C.E. by Obeid Allah Ibn-al-Habhab to celebrate the new capital, Tunis. It flourished during medieval times and was the second major university, after Kairouan University founded around 670 C.E. Noted social historian Ibn Kaldun was one of its graduates. The institution was closed during the Bourguiba era, and re-opened in 1992.

[8] Marzouki, I., *Le Mouvement des femmes en Tunisie au XXème siècle.*

[9] El-Sergany, R., "The story of war on the hijab," *Islam story,* par.18.

[10] For more in depth discussion see Charrad, M. States *and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* and El-Sergany, R., "The story of war on the hijab," *Islam story.*

culture moves about more freely than her counterpart in another culture albeit in the same geographical space—what seems more striking is the woman's self-awareness of her own position in society. Al-Minshari recognized the Tunisian woman's inequality with regard to personal freedoms and questioned what that meant to the individual.

Tahar Haddad's publication of *The Status of Women in Islamic Law and Society* in 1930 continued to draw attention to the women's question—that is, whether or not Muslim women are equal in all aspects of public and private life. A secularist who long promoted liberating women from restrictive customs and traditional beliefs that confined women from full and active participation in the public realm in the name of religion, Haddad sought an end to polygamy and the granting of divorce without any type of formal judiciary procedure, and advocated for female access to education and employment outside the home. His efforts eventually led him to self-imposed exile, but his memory has long been identified as the first voice of liberation for a "modern" Tunisia and his ideas considered to be at the heart of the *Code of Personal Status* (CPS).[11]

Code of Personal Status and its lasting impact on Tunisian society

The CPS, adopted by the newly independent Tunisian nation-state on August 13, 1956, was the first of its kind in the Arab-Muslim world to outline the rights and responsibilities of the man and woman in public interactions and the private space of family—which included marriage, divorce, management of the household—and the guarantee of public education for all girls, and women's access to employment outside of the home.[12] Moreover, the CPS also put an end to the infamous Dar Joued, a reformatory where "disobedient and rebellious" women used to be secluded until they learned how to behave themselves. This institution was created to avoid any social and moral danger. It was also a real institution that dealt with marital conflicts. Disobedient women could be sent there by a "cadi" or even a "wali" (male guardian usually the father, brother, husband…) without any court decisions.[13] These houses were considered the means by which a family could protect its family honor, given that the notion of honor traditionally resided with the woman. The

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[11] See Jelassi, M., "Tahar Haddad, Tunisien et Feministe," *Athétürk.*

[12] The Turkish Civil Code of 1926, although in place earlier (1926), differed in how it was implemented. The Tunisian government presented the code as an outcome of *ijtihad* (or the modern thinking applied o Islamic legal thought), while the Turkish code abandoned Islamic law altogether and mirrored the Swiss civil code (see Charrad, M., *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*).

[13] Largueche, D., "Dar Joued ou l'oubli dans la mémoire." In Ahmed Mahiou and Jean-Claude Santucci (Eds.), *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, Tome XXX.*

woman was expected "to protect and safeguard el Ardh" (honor).[14] Belguith notes that women could remain locked in, controlled and supervised for an undefined period of time. With the passage of the CPS, these houses were closed down throughout the country.[15]

From 1956 to the mid-1970s, Tunisian girls and women increasingly took advantage of their new role.[16] They pursued their education and they entered the workforce in record numbers, birth rates declined and a growing middle class emerged. If hardly less than 5% of children were enrolled in primary school in 1956, by 2003, this figure increased to 98% for both boys and girls; moreover, adult education rose from 16% in 1960 to 74% in 2004. Presently, the number of female students exceeds that of male students in higher education, representing 59% of total tertiary education enrolment in Tunisia in 2008.[17] (See Table 1).

Beyond the emphasis placed on education, the ambitious family planning program adopted by the newly independent Tunisia also had a tremendous role in transforming women's role in society. The fertility rate was 7.2 children per family in 1965; it declined to 3.4 in 1991, 2.6 in 2000[18] and 2.06 in 2008.[19] The liberalization of contraception in the mid 1960s may have contributed somewhat to the decline, but perhaps more so when it was legalized in 1973, the same year as the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision which legalized abortion in the United States.[20]

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[14] Ben Chaouachi, L., "Contrôle et surveillance derrière les portes closes," *l'Expression.*

[15] Belguith, S., "Elle n'ira plus à Dar Joued, " *l'Expression.*

[16] See Arfaoui, K., "The Development of the feminist movement in Tunisia 1920s-2000s," *International Journal of Humanities,* for historical overview.

[17] Statistics retrieved from UNESCO Institute of Statistics at http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=6086_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/tab4d.htm

[18] Population Policy Data Bank maintained by the Population Division of the Department of Economics and Social Affairs of the U.N. Secretariat. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/esa/population/

[19] National Institute of Statistics of Tunisia. Retrieved from http://www.ins.nat.tn/indexen.php

[20] In 1965, Tunisia government passed a law to permit legalized abortion during the first three months of pregnancy if the couple had five or more children and/or if the pregnancy was a threat to a woman's health (Tunisian Action Plan, Tunis, Tunisian Ministry of Health, 1991). On September 26, 1973, abortion became legal and became a right for all women with one condition: that it is performed by a qualified practitioner during the first three months of pregnancy. There is no restriction as to reason for the request. Between 1973 and 1974, the number of reported abortions doubled in Tunisia, from 6547 to 12427. In 2008, the figure was 18,500, approximately 10.1% of pregnancies (women between the ages of 15-49). (From Johnston, W.R., *Historic abortion statistics*.)

Modernization and modernity bring new challenges for the nation-state

At the same time, as a modern Tunisia became more self-sufficient; its population more educated; and its prominence in the West as a modern Arab nation-state more obvious, particularly under the leadership of its first, western educated president, Habib Bourguiba; new challenges came to bear on Tunisian society.[21] The modernization of Tunisia, according to Redissi, was "complex and non-mechanically" and had to address two transitional components: the modernization of structures and the democratization of political life.[22] The new nation-state initially succeeded in marrying these two concepts during the honeymoon years of independence. In the early 1960s, the country went through a vast collectivization program that had a dramatically negative impact on its economy; the situation improved thanks to a change that brought things back to normal; that is, ending that collectivization policy chaired by minister Ahmed Ben Salah who was held responsible for the discontent and anger it created in the country that stimulated growth in the 1970s. Nonetheless, too much protectionism and import substitution eventually required Tunisia to accept outside help, which was provided by the great powers, mainly the US, Europe and Gulf countries but not without implementing certain adjustments. The new program adopted in the second half of the 1980s liberalized prices, reduced tariffs, thus transforming Tunisia into a market economy.[23] Redissi describes this new economic transformation as a *neo-corporatist* State, in which certain elites bought into the State power in return for their economic freedom which was accompanied by a simultaneous State-led panoptic oversight of its people and activities.

Meanwhile, certain national and international events triggered shared concern among the Tunisian citizenry. At home, bread riots broke out in several towns in January 1984 in reaction to the government's removal of the subsidy on bread, and resulted in 80 deaths and several more injured. The riots came to an end when President Bourguiba announced that there would be no price increase.

On the international front, Tunisian people became concerned about the growing tensions and violence in the Middle East and anti-Muslim sentiment, both of which were heightened by the massacre of Palestinians in the Lebanese civilian camps of Sabra and

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[21] See Marzouki, I., *Le Mouvement des femmes en Tunisie au XXème siècle*, and Redissi, H., "Etat fort, société civile faible en Tunisie," *Maghreb Machrek, Liban : La montée des perils* for in depth analysis.

[22] Redissi, H., p. 89.

[23] Tunisia Economy. Retrieved from http://www.factrover.com/economy/Tunisia_economy.html For more in depth discussion and debate on neoliberal economics in the developing world, see authors such as Harvey, D., *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* and Plant, R. *The Neoliberal State*.

Shatila on September 16-18, 1982. The development of the communication and information technologies accentuated these concerns by making the authenticity and visibility of such an event ever more immediate and real in Tunisia, even for those citizens living outside the major cities. Continued Arab-Israeli conflicts in the region, the Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent chador imposition on Iranian women during these years, and the eventual construction of a walled-in Palestinian ghetto in Gaza, seemed to coincide with the rising tide of conservative thinking among Tunisians--quite often reflected in dress—and touching every layer of society.[24]

Thus, in spite of significant human development and modernization efforts throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, an Islamist movement emerged, taking the secular Tunisian population by surprise. Women, after "tossing away their veils to the cactuses" started to appear in public wearing headscarves![25] Men started to grow beards--both symbolic representations of a new religious conservatism. This observation is a striking contrast to journalist, Hebe Dorsey's 1965 post-independence commentary when she reported, "In ten years, Tunisian women have jumped straight from the veil into the bikini. Quite a jump, really… Another striking thing is the speed at which Tunisian women have established an easy, relaxed relationship with men. Again, not so long ago, a Tunisian woman would have met her husband (and the only unrelated man in her life) on her wedding night."[26] According to one woman, "In the early 1990s, you almost never saw veils on the streets. Now the media exposes Islam to society through TV programs which deal with religion and Islamic culture from all over the Arab world. Before, there were just the national Tunisian television stations that showed none of that."[27]

Concurrent with these national and international events came the mandatory Arabization of the public school curriculum soon after independence. Considered a reactionary policy directed against the former colonizer who had instituted French as the "official" language in the Maghreb, this new educational policy to teach in Arabic allowed a new, post-independent generation of boys and girls a more direct and personal contact with

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[24] Continued harassment of veiled women as well as bearded men by the Tunisian police has been reported as recently as late summer 2010 by journalist David Miller, "Veiled women bemoan persecution in Tunisia," *All Headline News.*

[25] Vincent, M., "Les tunisiennes ont jeté leurs voiles aux cactus, " *Elle,* pp. 4-5.

[26] Dorsey, H., "From Veil to Bikini in Tunisia," *New York Herald Tribune,* p. 5.

[27] Miller, D., "Veiled women bemoan persecution in Tunisia," *All Headline News.*

their religion and the oriental culture. They could read and write Arabic, could study the *Qur'an* on their own, and had the tools to engage in religious dialogue more easily, an experience that many of their parents, who were educated under a secular system, did not share. According to some scholars,[28] this education policy had significant impact on this generation of girls and boys, who now as young adults and parents themselves, could have more connection with the Arab world through a shared language.

The new autonomous feminist movement (1970s-2000s)

In the meantime and amidst the socio-economic challenges, women became more and more active in the public sphere and welcomed citizens in the task of nation-building. Some citizens saw this as a form of State-sponsored feminism, which later gave way to more "radical" ideas of autonomy and reflection. Both university-educated women, often of elite families, and women from more modest backgrounds who could benefit from the free, compulsory education that had democratized the country, sought an autonomous role for women, aimed at unleashing the movement from the weighty support of the government and finding achievement as women in their own right. "Before independence," Mrs. Dordana Masmoudi declares, "Tunisian women were not educated, now they are. Before independence, only 2% of women were university students, now they form 25% of graduates and these graduates participate actively in public and economic life."[29] Non-government organizations such as the Democratic Association of Tunisian Women (ATFD) and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) sought greater independence from the State, and the State found new opposition from various politically-based organizations such as the Tunisian League of Human Rights, and political opposition parties such as the People's Unity Party (PUP).

After President Bourguiba was deposed on November 7, 1987, by the then Prime Minister, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the latter legalized several political parties as well as the two autonomous women's organizations, (ATFD and AFTURD) in 1989. President Ben Ali's support for national reconciliation and democratization was widely acclaimed. He also "restored al-Zaytuna University to its traditional autonomy"[30] and took several other measures that raised his popularity to new heights. However, his new initiatives and his

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[28] Personal communications, I. Al-Gharbi and A. Grami, 7 July 2007.

[29] *Al-Raida*, p. 35.

[30] Enhaili, A. and Adda, O., "State and Islamism in the Maghreb," *Middle East Review of International Affairs,* p. 6.

apparent tolerance of an Islamist political party were considered by some as a political ploy and short-lived.[31] "The laws of May 3, 1988 and February 1989…excluded any political party organized around a racial, regional, linguistic and religious basis. These laws were meant to deny the Islamists any legal recognition."[32] Given this historic context, might an Islamic feminism movement find traction and solidarity in Tunisia today?

Islamic feminism in 21st century Tunisia: inroads and obstacles

Recognizing the importance of "State-sponsored" feminism and the birth of the autonomous feminist movements in shaping the Tunisian female consciousness, particularly during times of significant socio-political and socio-economic activity, can contribute to a fuller understanding of the pulse of present-day Tunisia and its willingness or not, to embrace the notion of an Islamic feminist movement within its borders. Similarly, articulating a clear definition of Islamic feminism and its specific precepts, and the Tunisian perception of the same movement is equally important in answering the question: "Can the new paradigm of Islamic feminism take shape in Tunisia, that for so many years defined itself as a secular nation-state?" Certainly, the task of definition is challenging given that in the past two decades, the term Islamic feminism has appeared in Muslim and non-Muslim countries, in different forms and having different emphasis.[33] However, the one common belief that unites the majority of activists in this movement is that Islamic feminism liberates the Muslim woman from the traditional patriarchal interpretation of the *Qur'an*; it embraces the woman as an active and equal partner in society through a gender-friendly reexamination of the same religious text as Caryle Murphy explains:

> Islamic feminism (sic) is based on the *Qur'an*. It rejects the idea that Muslim women have to abandon Islam to secure their rights. It asserts that there are other models for emancipated, modern women besides the western one. It sees the traditional extended family as the essential foundation of society. And it places just as much, if not more, emphasis on an individual's duties to the community as it does on recognizing individual's rights. And while Islamic feminism accepts that men and women have different roles within the family because of biological differences, it firmly holds that these differences do not make the women morally,

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[31] Personal communication, K. Cherif, 13 July 2007.

[32] *Ibid*., p. 7.

[33] Margot Badran in *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* has cited such scholars as Asfsaneh Najmabedeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Iran); Mai Yamani (Saudi Arabia); Yesim Arat and Ferida Acar (Turkey); Shamina Shaikh (South Africa). Most recently, Nadia Yassine (Morocco) has lent her voice to a new Islamic feminist movement that marries tenants of the Marxist economic model and Islam (see Interview. *Spiegel online).*

> spiritually, or intellectually inferior to men, or preclude them from participating equally with men in the public arena.[34]

In a more extensive reflection, Margot Badran traces the origins of the term and expands the notion of how to situate Islamic feminism in the twenty-first century. According to Badran, it is no longer necessary to set secular feminism in opposition to faith-based feminisms.[35] Instead, she supports the convergence of these feminisms by emphasizing that the rights of the human being are honored and guaranteed in both public and private spaces, simultaneously. Accordingly, the dichotomy between secular-and faith-based feminisms becomes obsolete. If one accepts and applies Badran's definition to what is happening in Tunisia today, can Islamic feminism become a viable movement in a country? Can secular feminism co-mingle with Islamic feminism and advance the status of Tunisian women with unified objectives?

From Badran's viewpoint, State feminism is synonymous with secular feminism, in which the secular connotes "the idea of shared territory" and "inclusive of all religious, constituting a shift from a nation understood as a singular religious community."[36] At the same time, though, she points out, that secular connotes "a certain separation or de-linkages between the institutions of the state and religious institution,"[37]commonly referred to in the West as "separation between church and State." If, on the one hand, the secular connotes inclusivity from a religious stand-point, and on the other hand, "State" connotes exclusivity through separation of powers, how might the notion of Islamic feminism flourish in Tunisia? Badran suggests that Islamic feminism is "more radical and transnational that any preceding feminism;"[38] it does not confine itself to the public discourse of change as she claims secular feminism has, but instead includes the private, more religious aspects of human rights affecting women—allowing the female equal status in both sectors. This is where the Tunisian secularist experiences a certain level of discomfort and heightened skepticism,

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[34] Murphy, C., "Islam and Feminism," *The Carnegie Reporter*, par.35.

[35] Note that secular feminism in the MENA region is often considered a "western import" and hence secular feminists and Islamic feminists naturally position themselves in opposite political perspectives.

[36] Badran, M., p. 304.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 308.

pointing out the recent and sharp criticism of autonomous feminist dialogue and debate in public space.[39]

Secularism, the cornerstone of the Tunisian mindset

Personal status law, a domain formerly under the purview of religious law or *shari'a* in Tunisia before 1956 (and which continues to be the principal legal framework in other Arab-Muslim countries today),[40] is a hallowed feature of Tunisian identity, male and female alike, as revealed in the interview excerpts that follow. Within the same population, there are some citizens who find a new, faith-based movement manipulative. "Feminism 'à la Islamism' as it has been presented in Tunisia, doesn't represent me," remarks Tunisian rights lawyer, Monia El Abed, who believes that it has been engineered in such a way so as to appeal to popular opinion at a convenient point in time. "In the early 1980s at the height of Islamist movement in Tunisia," she points out, "Islamists were strongly criticized for attacking the sacred CPS. In contrast, today's Islamists claim it is an achievement."[41] She questions the change of heart.

For Badran, this type of reaction is more common in the West but not uncommon among secularists in other areas of the Middle East and North Africa. She argues that all too often the terms *Islamic* and *Islamist*, are used interchangeably and they should not. If it happens, it can fuel misunderstanding and/or manipulation and prevent dialogue across ideological boundaries. The former term should be understood as a simple religious qualifier from the linguistic perspective and the latter to signify not only the religion alone, but also the more radical or strict, patriarchal approach to the interpretation of Islam's religious tenets.

Misuse or misunderstanding of terminology is not, however, the major impediment to Islamic feminism finding a strong voice in Tunisia to date. It is more complicated than words. The praxis of the Islamic feminist movement is *ijtihad* (a commitment to the independent study of the *Qur'an*) and *tafsir* (a pronunciation of interpretation of the *Qur'an*). These two approaches to studying the *Qur'an*, which until the mid-1990s were traditionally dominated by male theologians, now engage women from East and West with both secular and religious leanings, who assert that a "feminist" examination of the *Qur'an* shows that

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[39] Personal communications, K. Cherif, 13 July 2007; M. El Abed, 3 July 2007.

[40] The countries of Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates follow shari'a in issues of personal status –marriage, divorce, inheritance, and family responsibilities.

[41] Personal communication, M. Al Ebed, 2 July 2007.

women and men are equal in the eyes of God (Allah).[42] Islamic feminists have used such Qur'anic analyses and interpretation to transmit their mission and vision of Muslim women who can remain believers and simultaneously enjoy the same rights as men. If we agree with Charrad; that is, the same thoughtful examination (*ijitihad*) has already occurred when the Zaytunian male theologians in Tunis considered the *Code of Personal Status*, and eventually came to accept the new status of Tunisian women;[43] a gendered re-interpretation of the *Qur'an* then would not be necessary or relevant in the Tunisian context.

There are also important events of resistance in Tunisia pre-January 2011 that suggest that a faith-based movement, such as Islamic feminism, might not find solid footing in present-day Tunisian society. The prohibition of Islamist Al-Nahdha (Renaissance) Party in Tunisia in 1991, while seen as a manipulative and repressive act by the government to assure stability and electoral success for Ben Ali, made an important political statement: faith-based political parties are not welcome and should not have a place in Tunisian society.[44] This decision came after the 1989 elections, in which the government permitted Islamists to run in elections as independents in 1989 and capture "officially" 17% of the vote, came close to winning the majority in several urban areas.[45] As Redissi points out, "Islamism is the only movement that is placed at an absolute exteriority, by having an alternative political culture and fighting for another type of social community. Its opposition shows an organic State that is limited on two levels: a political level having to do with the exclusion of some on the social fringe of society impervious to the system, and a cultural level having to do with its modernist ideology that is not shared by the bulk of society."[46]

The Tunisian government has continued to display disfavor to visible symbols that might be understood as Islamist infiltration and religious conservatism. However, the State's

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[42] Well-known female Islamic scholars in this field are Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*; and Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.

[43] See Charrad's discussion in *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*, pp. 221-222.

[44] Note that as of January, 2011, the unity government in Tunisia lifted the ban on any kind of political party and/or faith-based organization. The exiled leader of the al-Nadha movement returned to Tunis on January 30, 2011.

[45] Maddy-Weitzmann, "The Islamic Challenge in North Africa, "*Middle East Review of International Affairs,* cites Burget and Dowell (1994, p. 234), who claim that some accounts estimate the percentages as high as 30-32%.

[46] Redissi, H., p. 100.

reaction to such public behaviors has been less strictly enforced of late. The most obvious example is the increasing presence of the *hijab* and *niqab* in public space, which were officially prohibited in the workplace and educational institutions by *Decree 108* in 1985. The reappearance of this clothing has engendered a vibrant public debate and has prompted a legal action. In 2006, Saida Akremi, a well-known Tunisian human rights lawyer, filed a lawsuit on behalf of a school teacher contesting the headscarf's ban in state buildings and schools in 2006. She won the lawsuit, but again the government's response and actions thereafter offered a mixed public message. The government did not openly praise the court's decision, but at the same time it would not enforce the ruling throughout the country, on the grounds that it would "divide rather than unite;"[47] nothing was issued by the government denouncing the court decision.

The pulse of a nation and its people today

To interpret the intentions of a government based on its action(s) or reaction(s) to certain events or behavior is complicated and ultimately speculative and incomplete without having considered the social climate surrounding such phenomena.[48] Accordingly, we researchers, undertook a series of interviews of Tunisian citizens to inform our study. We used the qualitative interview as our principal research tool to gain an authentic understanding of an environment that, on the surface, seemed to be showing signs of a less secular mindset in Tunisia, which might eventually embrace an active Islamic feminist movement.[49]

The study

Methodology. During the summers of 2007 and 2010, we interviewed 33 Tunisian citizens from diverse demographic backgrounds (age, gender, and educational background). The first round of interviews included only women, who self-identify as secular women activists and are known to the two researchers through their work and/or professional

[47] Williams, D., "Tunisia Veil Case Threatens `Odious Rag' Struggle" (Update1).

[48] Social theorists, modern historians, and cultural anthropologists articulate in some way this type of analysis as essential to making sense of what has occurred (See Badran, M.; Geertz, C.; Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.; Seale, C.).

[49] This ontological approach underscores Bridget Byrnes' position that "people's knowledge, values, and experiences are meaningful and worthy of exploration," p. 182).

interactions. The 11 informants were selected from two different generations: the *pioneer* feminists (55+ years old) and the "forty-something" generation of feminists, whom we label for the purpose of this paper as *contemporary* feminists. The focus during this investigative stage was to ask them to articulate their personal feminist history: How did they come to activism? What changes, if any, have they seen in the perspective and actions of the Tunisian women's movement over time?

The informants in 2010 included both men (6) and women (16) and represented more variation in age (18-80) and educational background (high school diploma through doctorate). At the time of the interviews, the majority (13) of the informants (male = 2; female = 11) were between the 18-30 years old. One male and 2 females were 31-45 years old. Three males and 1 female were 50-70 years old, and one male and one female were older than 70. There were two veiled women of different generations in the group, and one woman who had recently "unveiled", and one woman, the oldest informant (80 years), who as a young girl wore the *safsari.*[50] Among the male informants, only one male explicitly stated that he wanted to marry a veiled woman; the others did not.

We asked this group of informants to reflect on their views of the contemporary Tunisian woman, past and present looking for the following in their reflections: (1) Do they believe men and women are equal in Tunisian society today? (2) Do they make connections between their perceptions of symbols and behaviors, Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamic feminism? If so, how do they reason these connections? (3) How do they see the future evolving for Tunisian women in the next several decades?

In keeping with the U.S. federal guidelines for Human Participant Research, the researchers required all participants to provide their written approval to be interviewed and tape recorded (audio only).[51] The semi-structured interview protocols for phase one (2007) were not the same as those in phase two (2010).[52] However, within the specific interview phase (2007 and 2010), each informant was asked the same set of open-ended questions, which in turn, could be made more specific based on his or her answer. All interviews were

[50] The informant describes the safsari as "a light-weight material" of white silk, which was very beautiful and covered the hair and shoulders (not tightly).

[51] Prior to beginning the study, all research protocols and release forms were reviewed and approved by the Bentley University's Institutional Review Board, which has been certified by the United States Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP).

[52] Interview protocols are available upon request.

later transcribed (in French), and for this paper, translated into English by Drs. Tchaïcha and Arfaoui.

Findings (Phase one). In phase one (2007), while the majority of informants appeared to acknowledge the notion of universal feminism-- that is, all women should live and work in conditions that sustain human respect—the vision of a "united" feminist movement in Tunisia was less substantiated. There were also differing views by generations on their past achievements, the state of feminism today, and the meaning of the rising impact of Islamic fundamentalism in a secular state.

The differences. The *contemporary* feminists were born and schooled in a time when Arabization transformed the national education curriculum, and Islamic political parties came under fire and were subsequently banned. Their political activism took shape at the university yet seemed to fail to connect both generations of feminists. A human rights lawyer talks about this *disconnect* and the consequences:

> When speaking about the pioneer feminists, there was one aspect to their activism that was not well-done. They did not know how to transmit their work down to the next generations. There is very little written during that period by these women. *Le Mort de l'oubli* by Neila Jrad is one of the few personal accounts of the movement. There are plenty of statistics but not about people's thinking on the subject…perspectives and strategies. What we have now among feminists like those associated with AFTURD is stagnation…there is no development of new ideas, new ways of thinking. And while all this is stagnating, fundamentalism is gaining ground in Tunisia. Feminism is present but it is doing nothing! We don't have the courage to raise the questions about religion about veiling. We insist on saying we are secular, and because we are secular our thinking and our discussion should not address religious topics. (Monia)

Monia also comments on the lack of connectedness as part and parcel of the need for women-focused NGOs to concentrate on projects—activities and research studies in order to meet requirements of their funders.[53] As a result, there has been little time for meaningful, continual dialogue and reflection on women's issues. Amel, also of the same generation and a professor of Arabic Literature and Culture, comments, "Unfortunately, there is no solidarity network; everyone is working for his or her benefit. It is individualism that reigns now." Her peer and one of three female professors at Al-Zaytuna University, says there is also another reason:

> We were unlucky. During the time of the pioneer feminists, there was the euphoria of independence, this euphoria of progress, the ideology of progress and of the positive effects of

[53] For autonomous NGOS, which are often headed by the pioneer feminists, funding remains important; otherwise they could not survive. According to Khadija Cherif, former president of AFTD, the notion of autonomy was grounded in their commitment to make an independent choice in selecting the funding agency, i.e., not having to rely solely on national or international agencies to carry out their work according to their perspective.

> modernity. We, however, inherited the national disenchantment, the disenchantment of modernity, the disenchantment of feminism, the development of Islamism, the disenchantment of progressive theories, of communism, of socialism, of the Left. We were impregnated with all that. It's without doubt what gave rise to individualism. There is no longer a collective dream. (Ibqal)

Adding to this feminist *malaise* is the sense of frustration and futility among some activists who believe that "anything in the political arena having to do with women's issues is just window dressing -- nothing more, nothing less -- and overall, the notion of feminism is viewed poorly" (Monia). This sentiment prevents active participation. Additionally, many in this group have indicated, feminism has been associated with the foreign, with the western thought, with a certain attitude about women, and it is not welcomed.

The contemporary feminists also point to the difficulty of sparring on important woman's questions with their students because today there is no well-defined, well-developed feminist movement. This same group has also assumed some of the blame, indicating that their generation did not feel the usefulness of a women's plan which addressed the interpretation of the *Qu'ran*. Today the need is immediate because:

> We are in conflict, we sense the danger that threatens us. We also, until this time, have exposed the younger generation only one version of Muslim history, and this has been intentional. I really think that there is a very dangerous plan of falsification of the collective memory…there is an incredible misunderstanding of history. We must re-read and re-write the history of Islam. We must unravel the history of women in Islam because everything is hidden, we do not want the world to know it. (Ibqal)

All eight pioneer informants who were active in the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s had their own personal story of how they came to participate in the movement. Yet, in all the stories told, they talked about the Club Tahar Haddad, as a meeting place for informal public debate and discussion on important women's issue. The vibrant and valuable dialogue and debate that has been described as missing among contemporary feminists appears to have flourished during the time of the pioneer feminists. However, the latter also pointed out that there were disagreements, particularly with regard to male participation in activist agenda, and for some, prompted them to join different associations or follow a different career path later on.

***Similarities*.** Both groups of feminists in phase one agree that the re-emergence of the veil in Tunisian society is an indication of a new, less tolerant Tunisian mindset in which Islamic fundamentalism could find root and eventually squelch the liberties that Tunisian women have worked so hard to preserve in the past fifty years. One pioneer feminist offers this reflection, contrasting the past and present:

> The veiled women visible in Tunisian society in the mid 1980s were all women of the Tunisian Islamic Movement (MTI-a political party). Today that is not at all the case. It's

> much more diffused and in my opinion is much more serious and worrisome because it is diffused in the society and the women who wear the headscarf, in rich families, the bourgeoisie and middle class, the poorest, it cuts across all social levels and generations and we see that it's much more present. In a recent survey shows that 80% of these women are not political active, but when they asked why they wear the headscarf, they respond that it's because the powerful are unjust, because what is happening in the world is unacceptable and because the television has made them understand that their identity is Muslim, and that one must therefore wear the headscarf. (Khadija)

Along the same lines, the contemporary feminists articulate the complexities of the behavior the 20-something females who have chosen to wear the headscarf:

> They wear the headscarf, but they also have a modern plan for themselves; they want to work, to choose their spouse, to have a car and drive…They don't realize that the headscarf represents an entire world view, a view about the relation between men and women. It is an entire system of values, and that, they do not realize that enough. (Ikbal)

For Khadija, and the other pioneers, such thinking may have more serious consequences; it translates into a future election in which the Islamists will get their vote, if a new inclusive approach is not undertaken, "We can no longer denounce the headscarf because the Tunisian reality is different today. For us the democratic debate remains essential in order for our message to get out and explain what these women will lose wearing the veil." Her approach was also echoed by the *contemporary* feminists, one who felt that by attacking the headscarf will only rekindle more interest in wearing it, a phenomenon she describes as very dangerous because of the specific political message that it carries with it:

> It is first of all a political signal to the West, a protest against an unfair situation, against injustice…the Iraqi war, the Israeli-Palestinian situation. There is a sense of hurt, a suffering that we carry and which even exists amidst the non-politicized population. And of course, certain fundamentalists groups manipulate this situation to their advantage, and this is here where the drama is. Second, it is a political sign against the Tunisian government because we believe that it is incapable of solving the unemployment problems, because there are inequities, because there is corruption, and so forth…the veil is a sign of opposition. (Henda)

Both generations spoke of the essential principle of democratic engagement in which citizens can and should participate in open and free debate and to be able to choose their path. As Khadija explains, "We reason that by infringing on freedoms and the democratic process will only lead to reinforcing the Islamists and that repression was not the solution and that political security was not the solution; democracy was the only solution." The essence of the pioneer feminist movement, was political, one in which democracy had to overshadow the repression of opposing ideas. "Our thinking," according to Khadija, "was based on readings and on the inspiration of the United States and Europe gave us, especially France." However, today, the importation of "foreign ideas" also has its opponents, and according to both generations of feminists, has contributed to the increasing presence of the more conservative Islamist behavior in Tunisia, and for which the headscarf has become one of its symbols.

Findings (Phase Two). The objective of phase two of the study was to collect views from across a broader spectrum of Tunisian citizenry including: younger adults (male and female) in their 20s; older males (55+) who lived through the first wave of post-independence feminism; and several women in the 30s and 40s not necessarily self-identified as feminists. The interview protocols focused on the informants' vision of the contemporary Tunisian woman, what aspects of the past achievements articulated in the *Code of Personal Status* were valuable and came to fruition, and how they see the future of the Tunisian woman in the coming decades. Four major themes surfaced through these interviews:

- Formal education and workplace access/success
- Tradition vs. jurisprudence
- Child-rearing and role-models
- Religious conservatism (Islamic fundamentalism)

Formal educational and workplace access/success. Every informant across all age groups, gender, and educational level cited education as one, if not the most important achievement of the CPS. One young informant explained that her mother went so far as to make sure that she not wear the headscarf while attending secondary school for fear that it could interrupt her access to education, although she chose to wear the headscarf later on. A male informant of the same generation pointed out the high enrolment statistics for women in higher education, and that they exceeded those for males. There was no consensus among the informants across age range that the practice of equal pay for equal work was enforced. Several young informants expressed concern that men advance more quickly in their chosen career, and salaries were not equal; several others expressed a sense of pride that pay equity was in place.

Tradition vs. jurisprudence. Most informants acknowledged that the CPS articulates the legal rights for Tunisian women. However, their personal reflections indicated a juxtaposition of tradition and jurisprudence, which some informants interpret as impeding the practice of these rights. At the same time, their responses indicated evidence of an interchange of the terms *freedom* and *equality*.

> The Tunisian woman [sic] is *emancipated*, but really, really, she is not because Tunisia is a patriarchal society. We cannot deny that she takes second place in the social sphere. Even if we see the contrary, deep down, we are not *equal*. (Miled, 22)

> We have our *freedom*, the right to participation in education and politics…I know on paper that I can have this, that, and the other thing, but in reality what can we do? What will they (men) let us do?...There are some men who do not accept our rights, who mock them." (Imen, 27)

> There is an *inequality* that has always existed in Tunisia; we cannot get away from it and especially in the mentality of people, and generally those older people who transmit it to the youngest generations. But it has decrease. It hasn't disappeared and it is not going to in the next twenty or so years. I think it will decrease but very slowly…And the government gives women choices, rights, it tries to evolve, but at the same time, it stays vigilant. It's like it pretends for the world. (Azza, 27)

> The most important right for Tunisian women is their independence from their husbands. Before the CPS (sic), women's place was in the home; now they are everywhere. They dosn't owe them anything…It is a positive change. Even if the mentality in the country hasn't been totally transformed, the women years ago were expected to be submissive. (Ghaia, 80)

> In Tunisian society, which at its core is Muslim, there is profound feeling of misogyny. (Ahmed, 71)

Some women offered specific instances of subtle, but concrete examples of patriarchal underpinning in their lives:

> My company does not approve of women having their own check book. Asked her reaction, I do my work, that's it. There is nothing I can do. (Nawal, 28)

> In my family, (I have two younger brothers), a man is always a man. You have to let him do as he likes. It was me who had to clean the dinner table." (Leila, 26)

> I have two older brothers, one older sister and a younger sister. The girls didn't have the same rules as the boys, for example, when going out—girls weren't allowed to go out. When it came to my high schools studies, I had to pick a specialization that would allow me to attend high school close to home. I wasn't allowed to live away from home. (Amounia, 30)

> In the work place, being a woman manager is not easy. These women have to work twice as hard as men in the same position. Moreover, if their subordinates come from a background where they have not had much education, it is even harder for these women. (Dali, 38).

C*hild-rearing and role models* were themes that repeatedly appeared in interviews with the female informants across age groups when talking about the notion of male/female equality and freedom. Some informants pointed out that one or more of their parents had set the tone about what was possible for them as women in Tunisian society. Some mentioned their mother or grandmother, who had been an activist during independence, as strong role models. Several others cited their fathers as important figures in making them feel worthy of who they were. Others did not experience an open, parental dialogue of any kind. Despite this variance in nurturing experiences, the family was consistently cited as where nurturing took place.

> In my family, my parents were not educated. Everything was taboo. We didn't know anything and did not discuss anything. (Imen, 27)

> We have all the rights that men have, but that depends on the milieu because in my family, there was no difference. (Manel, 33)

> If the woman is educated in open family environment, she will find her place from her childhood. It's not at 20 years of age that she will find her place and will change and choose. If she doesn't find an affectionate father who listens to her little daughter, who lets her pick

> her own doll, her own toy, who will let her talk, who respects her desires, within certain cultural limits, meaning she won't transgress, she will gain that strength of character to know what she wants and she will choose what she wants and take it. (Fatma, 50)

> The idea of true equality in law really depends on the family—what happens in the family (Ghaia, 80)

There were also opinions, most often from young mothers and older women, about how and who should foster a strong sense of self during the child-rearing years, as well as about how to introduce religion to children. Manel, 33, mother of two boys recalls her younger son having nightmares about his nursery school teacher who had reprimanded him, calling his misbehavior "*haraam*".[54] Soon thereafter, Manel told the teacher that her child's religious education would take place at home and asked her to rethink the word choice and message that she was using to promote better behavior. Similarly, Fatma, a longtime school teacher, elaborates in more detail, saying:

> Young children don't need to know about religion, they need to understand love for one another. They will grow up and will discover God. It's humane, to respect one another, to encourage understanding with simple words and gestures. Children are looking for this. However, by using such religious terms [sic], we are blocking this totally.

How religiosity should/should not become part of a children's early education was not uniformly mentioned by all the informants; however, informants did commented on what they saw as problematic in educating the upcoming generations, and coincide with the views of the contemporary feminists in phase one of the study:

> One of the big problems in Tunisia is our national education system. For a while now, children have been the guinea pigs in this laboratory that fills their brains with useless things. And the focus has been less on history and civics, and more and more on the sciences and technology. As a result, we lack so much knowledge about our culture. There are some children who are lucky enough to have parents who encourage this kind of cultural education and others who do not, and rely on satellite programming and do nothing more. (Leila, 26)

> I have always said that Tunisians are puppets. It's the government that guides us. We are free but we really aren't. (Azza, 27)

Religious conservatism is a theme that repeatedly surfaced, often indirectly, in response to the larger question: How do you see the future of Tunisian women in the next several decades? Most informants were fairly confident that the CPS would remain intact and that women would continue to insist on their right to education and the workplace. However, they had mixed opinions about the future role of Islamic fundamentalism in

[54] Religious term used to critique action (e.g., behavior) or object (e.g. foodstuff) considered forbidden by the Islamic faith. Its opposite, "*halaal*" is permissible and therefore has a positive connotation.

Tunisia and what connection, if any, it has played in the re-appearance of the headscarf in public space and the potential threat to the CPS.

For those informants who came of age in the early eighties, they reported a stark change in the public sphere:

> In the past, during Ramadan, the cafes in downtown Tunis were open throughout the day; nowadays, more and more cafes close during the day. I don't recall when I was in my twenties my friends wearing the *hijab*, whereas now it seems that more and more of the 18-20 year old women are wearing it. When I go out now, I pay attention to what I am wearing and dress more conservatively because I don't want to attract negative remarks or looks from the more conservative population [sic], male and female. (Manel, 32)

> I see more and more women becoming submissive and that's heartbreaking for me. I am not sure but women seem less and less active in advocating for their rights. It is not necessarily because of the headscarf, but in my personal opinion, the headscarf blocks open-minded thinking. I see many young women when they start wearing the headscarf, they lose this open-mindedness and that scares me. (Khadija, 30)

The twenty-something generation expressed different opinions about the changing social landscape, especially with regard to the public female image. However, they did not consistently link the re-emergence of the headscarf in Tunisia to conservative Islam and/or a threat to women's freedoms in the future. Rather, they expressed concern about its multiple and confusing messages and what it says about their religion:

> There are young women in the night clubs who wear the hijab—that's OK, they are free to go to nightclubs. But there are women who are flashing and that is what makes is this behavior confusing. (Cyrene, 26)

> The young women of my generation are fake-believers. They wear the veil to get a husband. (Helmi, 25)

> I don't see the headscarf as an asset. It is only allowed now to show that the government [sic] is willing to give women the choice to wear it, to give the appearance that the government is allowing more freedom of choice in one's personal life. But I think it is moment in time that will pass. The headscarf is a fashion statement right now. I don't think it will change the mentality of Tunisians and it really isn't a threat. (Azza, 27)

> …I think that girls who wear the headscarf are not representing anything. It is rather the fashion. We see girls who wear the headscarf in night clubs drinking and dancing with their friend and so, what does that mean? …I think wearing the headscarf changes our environment some but for the most part, they (the veiled girls) live like everyone else. We have the choice to wear it or not, and that's not going to change. (Emma, 27)

> For me, there are more women my age wearing the headscarf than women of older generations. There are young women who wear the headscarf to hide something; some wear it to attract men as it makes them appear more serious; and there are others who are practicing Muslims who are sincere believers. (Salem, 23)

Salem's perspective was articulated in this young woman's decision to wear the headscarf:

> I started to wear the headscarf at age 23. I made an effort to get closer to God. I read the *Qu'ran* and learned more about Islam, and then little by little I started to wear the headscarf.

> It didn't happen all at once, I thought about it for about 6 months. But once I decided, I stayed with my decision…If I had a daughter, I would not make her wear but I would try to show her the right way. But it is a very personal decision and I cannot force her. (Amounia, 30)

The older generations were less inclined to acknowledge the practice of serious reflection in the changing fashion trend and expressed greater apprehension for the future of women.

> The apparent more conservative composure and behavior are not based on a sincere religious perspective…many of the younger generation are not well-versed in Islam. It is more the result of certain global issues since 9/11—the Gulf War, the second intifada, and the growing presence of media programming from the conservative Gulf Region.
> (Manel, 32)

> I have students, one day they come with tight pants, a sexy something and the next day you see them wearing the headscarf and I ask, so you're wearing it as a fashion statement or by religious conviction. Many of these women don't feel comfortable in their skin, they can't get to their most profound thoughts…They are women searching for their inner self. (Fatma, 50)

> The headscarf symbolizes submission. The mentality in Tunisia is changing more towards the notion of submission. It also is a way in which someone can go out and have the special status in the family. I am going out, I am covered, I am risking nothing. It's also is a way to run away from the pressures in the Tunisian family—the brother, the father, you can't go out like that. (Sonia, 45)

> When I speak with women who are veiled, who are educated, they don't always agree with their husbands. They are monogamous which is important at the level of social equality because now the woman can go out, work, get the same salary as the man and we can say that even the veiled women continue to advocate for the same rights as men in the public sphere. On the other hand, regarding the question of the CPS, they are more conservative in the social representation of themselves; that is, that they know that their husband is in command even if in the CPS, it is written as the shared responsibility. They (the women) accept this subordinate position in the home. (Hamadi, 55)

Several informants across generations also spoke about the increased presence of satellite programming from the Gulf States and its impact on Tunisia society. There are now more than 200 Arab Muslim satellite television stations available in Tunisia, a significant change from earlier times.

> We didn't have Arabic television when I was growing up. I watched programs from the U.S. and France, mostly cartoons,. There are two types of Arabic programming now that are quite popular--Lebanese TV with its beautiful women, wearing headscarves, lots of make-up and appearing very sexy, and religious programming. (Oumezin, 27)

> Of the 200 channels in Tunisia [sic], 99% are retrograde, and they rarely show women not wearing the chador. We rarely see campaigns in favor of women, in fact the contrary. They are conservative and chauvinist channels…and there are media conglomerates in the Middle East that insist in their programming regulations that women and even young girls be veiled. (Hamadi, 55)

> There is the television and there are always, always bearded imams, who say that the woman's body is a sin. You have to cover it. You can't show it because it attracts men. (Salem, 23)

> I have a good friend who wears the headscarf, in fact her family decided together, to become more religiously active, but they are very open-minded. That change came about around the

> same time that access to Arabic satellite programming entered the Tunisian broadcast market, with its recitation of the *Qu'ran* and hadiths. (Leila, 26)

Discussion and conclusions. Each phase of the qualitative study presented authentic voices of citizens living the Tunisian experience from their vantage point. Their varying perspectives and unique insights, intentionally included to complement our analyses of Tunisia's history since independence, have added a rich layer of description to our historical investigation. However, they should not be construed as generalizable; they are useful in that they point out the very divergent views omnipresent in present-day Tunisia.

Although *pioneer* and *contemporary* feminists differ about the state of Tunisian feminism, they unanimously have expressed concern about the growing religious conservatism in Tunisia. They see this trend as being both political and cultural, but most importantly as representing a real threat to the long standing social and economic rights Tunisian women have long enjoyed since independence. The *contemporary* feminists acknowledge their own short-comings and those of their predecessors in moving forward the movement through education, This self-criticism could signal the opportune moment for Islamic and contemporary feminists to begin a constructive dialogue, but for the fact that these *contemporary* feminists, like their feminist predecessors, remain staunchly secular and firmly opposed to entertaining a dialogue that would promote the adoption of any part of *sha'ria* law that would modify the CPS. So, Badran's model of an Islamic feminism that functions in both the public and private sphere, seems unlikely to find co-supporters among this generation of feminists. As Redissi explains about his homeland, "We can be secular in governing and religious in our lives."[55]

The broader cross-section of informants in phase two also recognizes the changing social landscape, which continues to show more and more signs of a religious conservative bent, and cites the headscarf as a representative icon of this trend. They offer varying interpretations about its significance; that is, why it has taken on such importance in recent years (and days), and whether or not, its re-emergence in Tunisia society is a potential threat to women's rights. They, too, herald the successes of women in education and the workplace through the decades of independence, and hold steadfast to that right for all women for the future. Yet, they are less homogeneous in their views about secularism vs. religious icons in public life. One informant articulates the various positions in this way, "Women in their 60s would say no to the hijab, women between 30-40 years would say why not, if one wants to,

[55] Personal communication, H. Redissi, 24 June 2010.

they wouldn't have a strong opinion one way or another, and the twenty-something generation , would say, "yes, when I am older, *inshalah*." The door then is opening – the younger generation is thinking and acting differently. Given that the age group (15-29 years) represents 29% of Tunisian total population,[56] there may be space appropriated to new, more faith-based organizations and movements of which Islamic feminism is part and parcel.

Postscript. On January 14, 2011, President Ben Ali and his family fled Tunisia, prompted by the December suicide of Mohammed Bouazizi that set afire a popular uprising, known as the Jasmine Revolution. The feeling of discontent and helplessness that this 24-year old man tragically expressed was not absence from the voices from some of the informants in this study; rather it was tempered. Bouazizi's act served as an accelerant igniting citizens across generations to challenge an autocracy that had for so longed repressed their personal freedoms and co-opted their own personal successes. The flood gate has opened, and with it has come complex and tough challenges about democratization amidst the euphoria of freedom for the evolving unity government.

Will Tunisia, despite having already lifted the ban on faith-based political parties and allowing Islamic leaders, such as Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of Al-Nahdha to return, also see their return to a more active role in the government? And does this call for inclusiveness in government representation, which is at the heart of democracy, signal a re-orienting of Tunisian women in the public and private spheres? Will the CPS be challenged and will the long-standing freedoms and rights enjoyed by Tunisian women disappear?

To date, these questions are fresh on the minds of Tunisian feminists and activists of women-focused NGOs. As recently as January 29, 2011, hundreds of women and feminists from the Tunisian Association of Democratic Womens (ATFD) and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) rallied in the capital to defend their rights and reject a possible Islamic resurgence. According to a university lecturer, Sabah Mahmoudi, "We want to send an important message to the Islamists, especially those from the Al-Nahdha movement, that we are not ready to pull back on or abandon our rights.[57] For this sector of society, the uncertainty and discomfort of marrying democracy and Islamic conservatism is alarming.

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[56] Institut National de la Statistique de la Tunisie (2010). Retrieved from http://www.prb.org/Datafinder/Geography/Summary.aspx?region=14®ion_type=2

[57] "Tunisia women rally against Islamists," *Magharebia,* par. 2.

Upon his return to Tunis, R. Ghannouchi announced, “The Al-Nahdha Movement has called for a truly modern democracy since its creation. We did not ask to apply the *shari’a.* We are proud of the *shari’a,* but we are not asking for an Islamic State. We are asking for the freedom and the respect of choice from the Tunisian people in the framework of a democratic regime.”[58] He has also promised that Tunisian women will be able to enjoy greater freedoms: “We have continuously defended the right of women and men to choose their own lifestyles, and we are against the imposition of the headscarf in the name of Islam and we are against the banning of the headscarf in the name of secularism or modernity.”[59] Citizens, secularists and women in particular, are skeptical of this pronouncement. Ghannouchi’s promises will not only be tested in the next six months when free elections are scheduled to happen, but thereafter when potential changes to the Tunisian constitution may be implemented. As Malika Zeghal points out there are two possible scenarios that can ensue in this situation:

> The first and more optimistic scenario envisions the Islamists’ participation in free elections as leading to democratization—with the Islamists themselves, regardless of their original commitment…becoming democrats by virtue of their mere participation. The second and grimmer scenario sees Islamist inclusion in the system ending in the creation of an Islamist authoritarian regime by means of “one man, one vote, one time: with the Islamists” lack of commitment to democracy being the most crucial factor explaining the type of polity that they will shape.[60]

Whatever unfolds in the next few months will impact how Tunisian women will push forward—for themselves and for their country. To date, however, Tunisia women are not seeing substantial female representation in the new transitional government, noting that only two women have been appointed to ministry positions and one as Secretary of State.[61] Whether this is an intentional oversight or not, Tunisian women face a daunting new challenge to guarantee their rights for full and equal participation in their public and private lives. This environment could certainly be a testing ground for collaboration of secular and faith-based feminisms.

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[58] “Accueil populaire de Rached Ghannouchi en Tunisie,” *GlobalNet*, par. 9.

[59] “Interview with Rachid Ghannouchi,” *Al-Jazera.Net*

[60] Zeghal, M., “Participation without power,” *Journal of Democracy,* pp. 31-32.

[61] This information is accurate as of February 12, 2011, and does not preclude possible changes.

Table 1

Literacy rates and net primary enrolment rates by gender in Tunisia, 1960–2008 various years (percent)

Year	Literacy adults 15 and older			Net primary enrollment		
	Male	Female	TOTAL	Male	Female	TOTAL
1960	—	—	16	—	—	—
1965–66	—	—	24	—	—	69
1970	41	15	27	—	—	76
1975	—	—	38	—	—	79
1980	58	31	45	—	—	83
1984–85	—	—	48	—	—	94
1990	72	46	59	—	—	—
1992	—	—	—	99	93	96
1995	76	53	65	—	—	—
1996	—	—	—	99	96	98
1999	—	—	—	95	92	94
2000	81	61	71	95	94	94
2001	—	—	—	96	95	95
2002	—	—	—	97	96	97
2003	—	—	—	97	97	97
2004	83	65	74	97	98	98
2008	86	71	78	98[a]	97	98[a]

[a] = data from 2007

Sources: *Arab Human Development Report 20*09, UNESCO Institute of Statistics, and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development.

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