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Tunisian Women's Activism after the January 14 Revolution: Looking within and towards the Other Side of the Mediterranean

By Giulia Daniele¹

Abstract

Tunisia is widely considered to be the country in which the current round of major upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East began. This paper explores the most prominent instances of women's activism which have taken place in Tunisia in the time which has followed the revolution of 2011. Through analysis of the principal literature related to the subject and the information gathered as a result of fieldwork conducted in the capital city of Tunis in February 2013, the paper examines the most significant transformations which have arisen from the active participation of women in the uprising. The involvement of women in the demand for changes in Tunisia questions whether women's political engagement can be seen as an essential asset within Tunisian civil society organizations, and, if it can, this prompts us to go on to consider the implications of this also for the role of international aid funding (with specific reference to the European Union). Overall, the Tunisian uprising can be represented in terms of a remarkable case in which civil society, including the women's organizations, has played a useful and effective role at a political and social level, ensuring the emergence of a feasible alternative pathway.

Key Words: Tunisian Revolution, Feminism, Secularism/Islamism, Transnational Politics, Interviews

Introduction

The Tunisian revolution² has moved on from being described as the most inspiring and outstanding revolt in the Arab world since the beginning of 2011 to a situation where people have experienced deep fragmentations and divisions in relation to what kind of political system,

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² The term 'spring' to indicate the events that have taken place in the MENA region since January 2011 has assumed stereotypical implications, and has been deprived of its original and challenging significance. In reality, it represents a process of rupture with the past regimes and with conservative visions, which is still going on throughout different outcomes. Moreover, this expression has been in the main used by Western academics and media, and only to a lesser extent in the Arab world, where these events have been referred to as the *thawra*, meaning 'uprising' or 'revolution'.

reforms and rights to move toward³. In the revolutionary aftermath, an impasse seems to have been reached, which is characterized by confusion, fear, and disenchantment. In spite of this, a number of social and political organizations have become active participants in the transitional process, and this is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the involvement of women activists, something which has constituted a potential element of hope for other women's movements in the region.

In Tunisian history, the introduction of the Personal Status Code⁴ in 1956 and the establishment of the legal status of Tunisian women in terms of the equality of all citizens before the law⁵ have combined to set up one of the first models for women's emancipation in the Middle East and North African countries, as well as women's engagement with political and social transformations has been deeply rooted within society. Since that time, the subject of the status of women in Tunisian society has also become significant in the agenda of the *Islamic Tendency Movement*, the precursor of the *Ennahda* party. Indeed, Shaykh Rachid Gannouchi raised questions concerning the Personal Status Code in his book 'Muslim woman in Tunisia: between Qu'ranic directives and realities of Tunisian society' (1993). However, this has not implied an opposition to gender equality, and this contribution has helped to underline the importance of contextualizing women's rights within the complexity of Tunisian society (Sadiki, 2012).

Since the time of post-colonial independence, Tunisian women have on the one hand struggled against dictatorships and violence, and on the other hand they have addressed their battles towards the traditional religious and cultural norms founded on the principles which exclude women from the public sphere. In the most recent years, a very noteworthy step forward took place just after the revolution, when, in August 2011, Tunisia became the first country in the region to propose withdrawing its specific reservations regarding the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women)⁶. This proposal has to date

³ This paper has been written and submitted in late 2013. It has been updated by the author in March 2014. This update became necessary since, in early 2014, a new constitution has been adopted in Tunisia, and this can be seen as a positive example of successful constitution-making for other similar contexts in the MENA region. In the drawing up of this new constitution, several critical points have been approved, such as those concerning the absence of Shari'a law, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, a ban on accusations of apostasy, freedom of the press, and equality of rights and responsibilities for men and women. This development has underscored the civil character of the country, especially its commitment to gender equality, and will be referred to throughout the paper in relation to the post-revolutionary pathway. The new constitution also promotes a more balanced internal political system, by neutralizing the political role of the military and the police.

⁴ This has been considered to be one of the most revolutionary family law codes in the Arab world, and governs several critical areas including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. The Code, preceding the 1959 Tunisian Constitution by three years and improved in 1992 and 1997, has guaranteed that Tunisian women are full citizens with full rights.

⁵ Article 6 in the 1959 Tunisian Constitution already stated that 'all citizens have the same rights and obligations. All are equal before the law'. Refer to the English translation of the Constitution of Tunisia at the following website: <URL:<http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Tunisiacconstitution.pdf>> (accessed 10 October 2013).

⁶ Tunisia ratified the CEDAW Convention in 1985, but with numerous reservations: article 9 (2) on equal rights with regard to nationality of children, article 16 (c), (d), (g) and (h) on equality in marriage and family life, article 29 (1) related to the administration of the Convention. CEDAW provides full equality for women in all these matters. In expressing these reservations, Tunisia has explained that the Convention conflicted with its national and personal status code. For more about this controversial subject, see the research reported by the *Association Tunisiennes des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)* in partnership with the *United Nations Population Fund-Tunisia (UNFPA)*, entitled *La levée des réserves à la convention CEDAW, mais non au maintien de la déclaration générale* (2011).

remained only a statement of intent, since the current government has not yet enforced such provisions.

As in many other Arab countries, in Tunisia the post-revolutionary euphoria has quickly changed its direction and is heading towards a situation where violent episodes of harassment and intimidation can be directed against women's initiatives calling for gender justice and equal rights. This situation described above represents the background to the fieldwork carried out in February 2013, on which this study is founded. Following an historical overview of Tunisian women's activism, this paper principally focuses on the question of whether, and if so, in what way, Tunisian women's and feminist organizations have changed their agenda in relation to the improvement of women's rights and participation in socio-political transformations during the post-revolutionary transition. Another issue examined throughout this paper is the relationship between secular and religious women's organizations, relationship which is often seen in terms of division. Finally, this research also deals with the main challenges experienced by women activists involved in transnational programs such as those operated in partnership with women's organizations from the other side of the Mediterranean, and particularly those operated under the umbrella of the European Union.

Employing a multidisciplinary approach towards the results of field research⁷, the transcripts of the interviews with Tunisian women activists (both from grassroots and institutional political participation) have been examined to implement a constructive discourse centered on the transitional process. In evaluating these findings, the intellectual as well as the political discussions which considered the role of women activists have been taken into account, with the work of these women being seen as constituting an essential asset within the current socio-political transformations.

Tunisian women's activism: a historical overview

Once it is understood that any consideration of the current status of women activists in Tunisia which does not place the topic within its historical context can be neither correct nor useful when seeking to contribute meaningfully to the existing literature, Tahar Haddad's political and social thought in his pioneering book entitled 'Our Women in Shari'a and in Society' (1930) emerges as the essential text in this field. Starting from that point, a debate on the role of women inside Tunisian society has prepared the ground for future women's struggles. In particular, in the period immediately following independence from France, the first president of the country, Habib Bourghiba, put reforms related to women and family law at the center of his agenda, although women's organizations did not play a real autonomous role in this discourse.

From the time of Bourghiba's reforms, the term 'state feminism' or, alternatively 'institutional feminism'⁸, has been employed as a governmental tool for use in promoting gender

⁷ The selection of data sources has been chosen from among the research documentation produced and published by the foremost Tunisian women's organizations, such as *Association Tunisiennes des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)* and *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFTURD)*. The interviews with women activists were conducted over a period of two weeks during February 2013 and the language used for these was French (and later translated into English). The field research, based on fifteen open-ended semi-structured interviews, included reference to activists' individual behaviour together with their active political position within their society, and literature review at the *Centre de Recherches, des Etudes, de Documentation et d'Information sur la Femme (CREDIF)* and at the *Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain (IRMC)*.

⁸ On this topic, see Sophie Bessis (1999), Amira Mhdahbi (2012), Emma C. Murphy (2003).

equality and women's rights, with the objective of excluding alternative politics experienced by independent feminist activists. This has meant that those who advocated gender rights and women's empowerment in contrast with the government view had to pay a heavy price, and were subjected to vigorous oppression. As the scholar Iqbal Al Gharbi⁹ has observed:

We could consider the Tunisian context as an exception; in fact what has been defined as 'state feminism' has achieved a wide improvement of women's rights and equality between women and men. The feminist tradition in Tunisia is very deep-rooted. Whilst on the one hand, such a kind of institutionalized feminism has been promoted, on the other hand, women activists had to struggle strongly against the dictatorship where any form of freedom was prohibited¹⁰.

These words demonstrate the way in which the Tunisian government made use of the advancement of women's rights merely as a strategy which could be deployed in order to become internationally accepted by Western countries. However, the relatively successful results obtained by independent women's and feminist movements must be kept in mind, starting with the earliest contributions made at the end of the 1980s when the *Tahar Haddad Club* was founded. This organization embraced critical debates on women's perspectives, with these ranging from topics such as the effect of Tunisian statutory legislation on women to the contribution of women in the labour force. Among their most significant initiatives, the launch of the women's feminist magazine *Nissa* in 1985 (although it was not published for long, and folded two years later in 1987) helped to enable women to confront diverse internal views and examine their desire for autonomy from institutions and parties, and, in a parallel way, from other forms of subjugation such as the cultural influences originating from within Western feminist thought.

From that time, two of the foremost women's organizations began to emerge. The *Association Tunisiennes des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)* and the *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFTURD)* were formed in 1982 and in 1986 respectively, although they did not become fully institutionalized until after President Bourghiba's departure. These groups worked together whilst retaining their individual focus, with the former pursuing an activist political agenda, and the latter being directed towards a more research oriented perspective (Labidi, 2007: 15-18).

Referring to what the interviewees have stated whilst describing their political engagement, the majority of *ATFD* activists recognized themselves as feminists, by reflecting on the political methods they have used to pursue women's issues and to make these struggles effective¹¹. Among them, Souha Ben Othman, one of the leading *ATFD* activists, stressed her feminist identity thus:

I am a feminist and I cannot deny it in my everyday political activism. I cannot take out my feminist identity since it is part of me. For me 'feminism' means women

⁹ She has been the first woman professor teaching psychology at the University of Zitouna (Tunis) and the first woman director of the University radio. Despite being the victim of ongoing violence by Salafi groups, she has carried on her primary aim of modernising and rationalising religious teaching in order to reconcile the religious discourse with the concept of human rights as universal values.

¹⁰ Interview with Iqbal Al Gharbi, Tunis, February 20, 2013.

¹¹ More details on *ATFD* political aims and projects are available on their website at: <http://femmesdemocrates.org> (accessed 15 July 2013).

should occupy the same position in society in comparison with men. Women should have same rights as well as same obligations, without any kind of discriminations. Feminism means protecting women regardless of their social background, political identity, position. Women and men are equal in all sectors¹².

As in many other similar contexts, Tunisian women's activism cannot be defined through a univocal picture, but must rather be seen as a diverse and fluid movement linked with the everyday reality of the country. The growth of women's and feminist organizations in Tunisia has stressed the double task of fighting against any form of discrimination between men and women, and of completely removing the exploitation, oppression and domination caused by strong asymmetries existing among diverse individual, religious, gendered and social class relationships (Marzouki, 1993:18). In this way, the intersection between autonomy and pluralism has been emphasized both at the grassroots level and in academia.

Within such a framework, since the end of 1990s, one of the co-founders of *AFTURD*, the sociologist and feminist activist Ilhem Marzouki, has added a strong critique directed towards the failure of historic women's organizations to provide a real status of change and political autonomy. In her writing, she attempted to question women's active participation from within their own organizations, underlining that:

The current women's associations, set up on such a difficult ground, have not realized that what is at stake could represent the re-establishment of a just balance since their elite formations have turned more towards a political partnership, rather than a social mobilization.

(Marzouki, 1999: 7)

After the revolution: between fragmented politics and challenging debates

Jumping forward in time to the most recent period, the gender parity requirement within political parties, and in particular the Islamist party *Ennahda*, has apparently been assured by its holding of more than twenty per cent of seats in the National Constituent Assembly¹³. Until October 2011, *Ennahda* has appeared to be quite sensitive to the Personal Status Code and to consent to working in such a framework; however, a controversy centered around article 28 of the first constitutional draft in 2011 describing women's and men's roles as 'complementing one another within the family' has represented a very difficult barrier to be overcome (Sadiki, 2012). In fact, the victory party *Ennahda* has suggested reconsidering some of the clauses of the Code that could be seen as being in contradiction with Islam. Following this political direction, the whole of Tunisian society has debated on the issue of women's rights and, for the first time, on the possibility of giving way to the principle of 'complementarity', rather than supporting the founding pillars of 'equality'.

In this sense, 'complementarity' in effect means that women's rights exist only in relation to men's rights. In that circumstance, and in becoming directly linked with the rights and roles of men, women would have lost their status of being full citizens. This would have been a backward

¹² Interview with Souha Ben Othman, Tunis, February 14, 2013.

¹³ In the 2011 election, women obtained 49 out of 217 seats, and in particular women from *Ennahda* took 42 out of 89 seats. The Islamist party is one of the oldest in North Africa, originally inspired by the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt and, among its founders, one of the most well-known leaders is Rachid Ghannouchi.

step compared to the various expressions of commitment to women's rights in the Tunisian political narrative. During the constitutional process and during the 2011 election campaign, this question has been surrounded by strong ideological divisions and growing internal struggles, up to the time of the completion of Tunisia's new constitution in January 2014. This most recent document emphasizes equality between men and women and forbids gendered discriminations.

Whilst being seen as one of the biggest threats towards women's lives in the transitional scenario, Tunisian women's feminist and secular organizations have remained vigilant, safeguarding their fundamental rights and freedoms so as to confront the widespread veil of silence concerning gendered violence. In such a debate, Souha Ben Othman expressed her concern about that situation, explaining the most difficult moments in the process of post-revolutionary transition:

After the revolution, the majority of women's rights acquired throughout a long history of emancipation have been put in danger. Today we risk our rights, our Constitution, our struggles. At many levels, women's rights are questioned by both legislative tools and political practices. Today, Tunisian women are afraid of going out for the reason that we do not know what could happen in the street¹⁴.

In Tunisia's emergent civil society, this cause has been at the center of a contentious public debate, and women's persistence about the possibilities for change has produced the final omission of the 'complementarity' cause from the second and third drafts of the constitution. The following collective declaration, published by a network of women's and feminist associations mobilising to assert their rights to full equality and citizenship, represents one of the noteworthy examples of the way in which Tunisian women have continued to struggle after January 2011:

Complete solidarity and unity towards the preservation of our rights and the establishment of citizen equality in favour of women; irreversible determination to defend what we have acquired through the Code of Personal Status and to respect the international conventions concerning human rights, including women's rights.

(Declaration of *Tunisiennes pour les droits des femmes, l'égalité et la citoyenneté*,
13 August 2011)

From the revolutionary outset and in relation to women's institutional representation, the presence of a considerable number of women on electoral lists and in the National Constituent Assembly has been seen as a political tool used mainly to convince people of the closeness of political parties, and particularly of *Ennahda*, to gendered issues, by often instrumentalising the role of women. However, the context of the drafting of the new constitution has generated a participatory debate on gender issues in which Tunisian women, both Islamist and secular, have occupied crucial positions. As described in detail by the scholar Amel Grami:

Before the revolution Islamist women could not declare their belonging, their identity narrative, but after the election we should ask them why only wives, sisters, daughters of *Ennahda* men activists have been elected. In my opinion women are not independent activists, they are the expression of their males. On

¹⁴ Interview with Souha Ben Othman, Tunis, February 14, 2013.

the other hand, Islamist women are very implicated in helping poor people in their difficult daily lives, even though they do not have a political discussion inside their organizations and political parties¹⁵.

As many of the interviewees who contributed to the field research referred to in this paper have confirmed, women have been present in most of the important events within the revolution frame, and this has been manifested in a number of decisional and organizational steps, as well as in the coordination of the main strategies to be developed. The heterogeneity of the groups of women involved has reflected different political, ideological and gender-focused frameworks (from secular to religious, from middle-class to poor status, from well-educated to illiterate). By attempting to reverse the traditional political pattern, the opening of public spheres to women has allowed them to experience active participation in the political scene.

Other interviewees have stressed the necessity of keeping in mind the work done by pre-revolution activists when considering the post-revolution situation, since in the aftermath all people have become 'activists'. Nevertheless, it is also important to remember those who have already been active under the regime, especially women who struggled vigorously against the dictatorship to achieve their rights and a just equality between men and women. Pre- and post-revolution experiences have engendered considerable changes in terms of how politics is done: everything has been transformed in the Tunisian political scene with the introduction of a stronger role taken on by civil society.

Moreover, as described by Tunisian women activists engendering controversial debates in order to find a united voice, two of the essential aspects of their work consist of their challenges against patriarchy and their multifaceted interpretations of 'feminism(s)'. The majority of women interviewees have expressed a variety of narrative identities in relation to their political mobilization, as Mounira Yacoub, a historical left-wing activist, has stated:

I define myself as a Tunisian woman activist since I am not only engaged with the feminist movement. First of all, we need the liberation of human rights at every level (political, economic, social, cultural) and to teach it to all people, not only to women. On the other hand, political activism experienced by women has taken a central function in Tunisian society, even though as women we do not have key roles, power and equality with men yet¹⁶.

Further interviewees' perspectives have underlined how struggles for women's rights are not separable from the rest of the struggles for human rights and equality, and how these struggles involve questions which are at the same time social and political. The will to pursue new viable practices to challenge the condition of impasse in which the majority of Tunisian civil society organizations, and above all those from women's and feminist backgrounds, have survived in recent years, has been well expressed by the current president of the *Association Tunisiennes des Femmes Démocrates*, Alhem Belhadi. In her view:

We, as women activists, need to integrate our ways of doing politics within the widest global context in which unequal relationships between men and women are still increasing and generating more and more discriminations, including social

¹⁵ Interview with Amel Grami, Tunis, February 21, 2013.

¹⁶ Interview with Mounira Yacoub, Tunis, February 13, 2013.

class asymmetries and disparities within the family¹⁷.

Indeed, many women activists have continued to be vulnerable to the accusation of remaining on an ideal stage, far from the everyday reality of their society¹⁸. One of the most common critiques directed towards Tunisian women's feminist activism has advocated the need to establish a deep linkage between the theoretical discourse of what has been defined as 'democratic feminism' and the facts on the ground. In this direction, a number of scholars and activists have suggested ways through which the most well-known women's feminist initiatives, starting with *ATFD* and *AFTURD*, should overcome their internal structures of power and privileges, and avoid becoming elitist movements. In order for them to become more representative and widely recognized, the differences existing among women activists should be placed at the center of their political debate. In her latest contribution concerning the effectiveness of women's political actions in Tunisia, the academic Noura Borsali has included a reflection on this challenging moment within the women's movements:

This means the necessity of questioning ourselves, without neither indulgence nor nostalgia, on the limits, on the impasse of democratic feminism and on which possibilities are needed to overcome such a situation. [...] The democratic feminism has not been able to represent the richness of words, the daily creation of women, the complexity of this reality. [...] How could we send this message to our society? What tactic and strategy shall we adopt in order not to transform feminism in an elite movement definitively marginalized?

(Borsali, 2012: 180-181)

This reflection describes the status of Tunisian women's feminist discourse, and the status of their mobilization, which has brought them to a point where they need to decide on whether to take the political pathway along with other forces of Tunisian civil society, or to remain with the status of being an elite. With regard to the prospects for the future of women and feminist organizations in the country, one of the most controversial of the current debates is concerned with the challenging actions led by the Tunisian branch of *FEMEN*¹⁹, which have raised several issues, especially those related to the patriarchy question. Following the emergence of a 19 year-old Tunisian activist, Amina Tyler, who posted a topless photograph showing on her chest the sentence 'my body is my own and not the source of anyone's honor' on Facebook, much discussion and criticism have been engendered in Tunisia, and all over the world. In particular, this activist posting has drawn attention to the meaning of a westernized way of feminist activism in Arab and Muslim countries. In the attempt to understand the

¹⁷ Interview with Alhem Belhadi, Tunis, February 20, 2013.

¹⁸ Regarding an analysis of different views, attitudes, and practices pointing towards political engagement within Tunisian women's feminist groups, see the researches conducted by Badra Bchir (1993), Azza Ghanmi (1993), Ilhem Marzouki (1993, 1999).

¹⁹ This is originally a Ukrainian feminist group and was founded in 2008. Members use topless protests in fighting against the three manifestations of patriarchy that are exploitation of women, dictatorship and religion. In opposition to the idea of exporting these practices in the Muslim world, and particularly to the *FEMEN* campaign named 'International Topless Jihad Day', a number of Muslim women activists have questioned the value of such Westernized images and have emphasized their own significance and different identity as legitimate feminists. In addition, a group called 'Muslim Women Against *FEMEN*' has accused *FEMEN* of spreading and imposing Islamophobic and imperialist views.

effectiveness along with the diverse consequences of such protests emerging within the MENA region, the internal debate that has followed this event has represented an alternative starting point for the identification of potential political tools for use by women activists working in a common direction to overcome any form of gendered violence.

Secularism and religion: focusing on women's equality and their rights

The concerns expressed by the Tunisian women activist interviewees provide glimpses of what their political inclusion within the ongoing transitional process means to them. In the present situation, internal divisions have appeared between the secular side, who is afraid of the resurgence of Islam in Tunisian society, and the other section of society, the Islamists, who have to face thorny problems related to the economic situation, increasing unemployment, and matters of justice and political reconciliation²⁰.

Referring to a wider context, the prominent feminist scholar Margot Badran has expressed the view that if women continue to take such post-revolution activities forward, it is necessary for them to be aware that they are implicated in an ongoing process of transformation in which the opposing forces involved are not composed of those with secular and religious visions, and that the decisive dispute will instead be between the supporters of patriarchal ideas and the defenders of an egalitarian status (Badran, 2011: 78-87). In relation to the Tunisian context, it is necessary to understand all the different components, reasons and perspectives that have characterized Islamist women's movements, claiming recognition of both their religion beliefs and their public role in society. As Iqbal Al Gharbi had already explained before the revolution with reference to Islamist women activists:

On the one hand, these women develop a rational discourse such as other political activists. On the other hand, their political-religious engagement represents a social consequence that reveals a social unease, a psychological and sociological crisis in which women from the Arab-Muslim world live. As a matter of fact, women's condition concentrates all the contradictions of a cultural community divided between the modernity project and the historical anchoring of Islam into the tradition.

(Al Gharbi, 2007)

The core issue, especially in the post-revolutionary narrative, has been represented by the public position of Islamist women's organizations and their relationships with political parties, and the impact of these on the enlarging social base of women's activism. This can be explained as an outcome of the flourishing of the Islamic-based activism that has increasingly converged with historic secular women's activism. Such a political success has frightened most secular women, who have been worried about the consequences of the growth of an Islamic discourse which has characteristics and goals which can be in conflict with those of the liberal and feminist one, and who have been afraid of losing the ground they have gained since their independence in terms of personal freedom and human rights.

With regard to women's representation in Islamist parties and particularly in *Ennahda*, it

²⁰ This point has become fundamental for the resolution of the increased tensions within Tunisia, particularly after the political assassinations of the main leaders of the opposition, Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmī, respectively in February and July 2013.

is recommended to focus on two key factors: the increasing number of participants and the reasons why these activists have become involved in the political scenario. In such a framework, the main cause has been the disenchantment of numerous women with the process of democratic transition that has been blocked by the current impasse. Furthermore, numerous women had already developed a political consciousness and decided to join in *Ennahda*, whilst their husbands, brothers and sons were in prison as a result of the politics of oppression pursued by Ben Ali (Marks, 2011).

Resulting from experiences of violence, discriminations and arrests, an example of this kind of Islamic activism is embodied by the *Tunisian Women Association*, which is based in Tunis and was established just after the revolution in April 2011 with the purpose of improving women's knowledge (especially those women who live in situations of socio-economic adversity such as poverty, illness, divorce and prison) by making them aware of their effective roles in the development of their society²¹. As the president of this association, Ibtihal Abdellatif, and the general secretary, Mounira Ben Kaddour, explained:

We are Tunisian women, we define ourselves as Tunisian activists. At the same time, we are Muslim. We do not like the term 'Islamist', since it has been used in disparaging ways and often linked to the 'terrorist' one. We are struggling for all Tunisians, women and men. We are dealing in particular with women ex-prisoners who were oppressed by the previous regime and who suffered both mental and physical tortures. Today we are working on more than 400 political prisoners' dossiers [...] In many cases, other women's and feminist organizations did not want to know the reality of what Tunisian Muslim women had to suffer during their struggles against the regimes of Bourghiba and Ben Ali²².

Unlike other similar realities in the MENA region, the Islamic feminist discourse²³ in Tunisia has not yet advanced to a significant extent. However, in some cases Tunisian Islamic feminists have advocated reinterpreting the Qu'ran and Sunna on the subject of women's rights and gender equality, and have focused their political engagement on reshaping a social agenda in support of underprivileged people. As Islamic women activists, they have recognized the most serious challenges to be faced in relation to achieving social justice. In following the path that has already been examined in the previous paragraph, the dynamics of this discourse have been extended by the assertions that secular feminist movements have been accused of speaking mostly to their elite and not to the poorest social classes of Muslim communities.

Such perspectives on Islamic women's activism have arisen as a sort of re-appropriation of religious and cultural identities since, after so many years of dictatorship, they can now finally follow and publicly manifest their own expressions (Gray, 2012: 286). In the ongoing transitional period, on the one hand, some women activists from different backgrounds have tried to further their own struggles by seeking internal support for continuing on their alternative

²¹ *Tunisian Women Association* brochure, February 2013.

²² Interview with Ibtihal Abdellatif and Mounira Ben Kaddour, Tunis, February 21, 2013.

²³ The concept of 'Islamic feminism', its theoretical basis and its practical examples in the current women's political activism have been at the core of an increasing number of academic debates led both by Western scholars and within Muslim countries. Adopting a critical approach towards male-dominated Islamist parties as well as Western secular feminist women's movements, Islamic feminists have particularly addressed patriarchal and conservative interpretations of Islam. For the essential literature on this topic, see: Margot Badran (2002), Fatima Mernissi (1985), Valentine M. Moghadam (2002), Amina Wadud (1999).

political pathways and preserving their successes in terms of rights and representation (particularly the secular side), whilst on the other hand, others have proposed a reaffirmation of their religious values as a consequence of the downfall of the regime.

Women's joint political initiatives in the Mediterranean: a feasible cooperation?

In line with the analysis suggested in this paper on the current status of Tunisian women's activism, another central characteristic developed from the earliest times of their political involvement is represented by the fact that these activists, particularly those belonging to the *Association Tunisiennes des Femmes Démocrates*, have promoted alliances with other autonomous women's feminist organizations from Europe and other Arab countries. An example of this alliance-building occurred in 1991, when, together with women activists from Morocco and Algeria (under the sponsorship of UNIFEM) they created the so-called *Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité* which resulted in the publication of several reports²⁴ directed towards the encouragement of gender equality. Since that time, participation in transnational networks has represented a significant part of the Tunisian women's agenda (Gilman, 2007: 105-107). Such historic examples of alliance-building have emphasized the importance of understanding women's and feminist backgrounds as dynamic social forces that claim representation and responsibility within their own society, and, at the same time, that suggest mutual relationships and cooperation towards other women's realities.

This trend of developing alliances has led women's organizations towards the formation of a new configuration of political strategies and practices to be conducted in the Maghreb as well as with the other side of the Mediterranean. Looking at the significance of these women's joint actions, it is essential to reflect on the linkage between local and global dimensions from a transnational perspective, which is capable of relating both to their politics and to the various forms of oppression with which they have to live. Although a sensitive and political closeness extending across borders has been demonstrated in a few cases, women's joint transnational projects in the Mediterranean are still seen as ideal processes, rather than being well-established practices on the ground within Tunisian civil society.

Reflecting on this debate, it is necessary to bear in mind two of the most remarkable analyses which have examined what can (and cannot) be considered meaningful in terms of transnational women's politics, and apply these analyses to the specificity of Tunisia. Firstly, the anthropologist Ruba Salih has maintained through her research on transnational women's networks in the Middle East and in Europe that the growing up of effective forms of transnational initiatives has usually required a political agenda based on:

The development of new political subjectivities advocating for change and reforms, and simultaneously, the assertion of the cross-border nature of women's affiliations, loyalties and political sensibilities.

(Salih, 2010: 56)

Secondly, and more centered on the Tunisian case, the study conducted by Lilia Labidi has underlined how the historical context of Tunisian women should have given them the

²⁴ The *Collectif* has produced, published and distributed a number of publications which were concerned mainly with their position towards the Personal Status Code and its related issues. However, under the former regimes, it was very risky for them to be able to disseminate such information widely among the Tunisian people.

opportunity to move towards 'humanist feminism', as both a legal and a political subject, with the aim of establishing a Maghrebi women's network (Labidi, 2007). Especially after the revolution, Tunisian women activists have been able to lead such projects by drawing on similar experiences from the region, particularly the Moroccan women's struggle for the reforms of the Mudawwana. On the one hand, such political changes from the national to the transnational level can be seen as an influence for good with regard to internal relations in Tunisian women's organizations, whilst on the other hand, these transformations have created new paradoxical scenarios. However, these transnational approaches and practices have not yet taken root in a widespread way among Tunisian women feminist activists, as can be seen from the declarations of several of the women interviewees working in different contexts.

In a parallel way, in the revolutionary aftermath the growing number of international organizations funding similar projects in Tunisia has transformed their structures and strategies, increasing what has been defined as the 'NGOization'²⁵ of Arab women's movements. A significant consequence emerging after the January 14 revolution has been represented by examples of grassroots women's activism promoting and coordinating an equilibrium between their politics and their external aid support, which brings with it the risk of corruption within civil society. On this topic, all the interviewees have expressed their awareness concerning such prospects, and many of them have distanced themselves from the paternalist view often manifested by the declarations of international donors.

Moving to the institutional level, since 1995 the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), also named as the Barcelona Process, has been developing joint projects between the European Union and several countries in the Southern Mediterranean, with a special focus on human rights programs, and above all on women's rights and gender equality. Also in this context, the *ATFD* and *AFTURD* organizations have led several initiatives dealing with the active participation of women in the implementation of institutional reforms as well as their emancipation in the socio-economic spheres²⁶. The president of *AFTURD*, Radia Ben Zekri, has contextualized the issue of international aid in the case of Tunisia, explaining that:

It is a very complex topic due to the fact that most European countries have sustained the regime of Ben Ali (especially regarding his policies against the Islamic wave and towards modernity). We are working with the European Union, as we are part of EUROMED platform, along with the most progressive experiences of European civil society. On the other hand, we have to continue with our own aims and projects, without losing our perspectives under the logic of external funding²⁷.

Concerning further international projects, the European Commission, together with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, launched a new

²⁵ A term introduced by the scholar Islah Jad regarding the debate on women's organizations and their ties to international donors: 'it has sometimes been viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West, and as a tool for the West to expand its hegemony. [...] What NGOization means is the spread of a different form of structure for women's activism, one which limits the participation of women at the local level to 'their' organization. NGOization also limits the struggle for national causes to 'projects' geared to priorities set by an international discourse without diversity, and fragments the accumulation of forces for social change'. See Islah Jad (2004).

²⁶ Interview with Gianandrea Villa, who is responsible for the Civil Society and Decentralized Cooperation Department of European Commission, Tunis, February 18, 2013.

²⁷ Interview with Radia Ben Zekri, Tunis, February 19, 2013.

regional partnership called *Spring Forward for Women* in October 2012, with the aim of encouraging the empowerment of women in the Southern Mediterranean. The European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Füle, has explained the importance of the *Spring Forward* initiative in promoting the active engagement of women in decision-making as well as in women's political and economic rights:

Women in Tunisia were at the forefront of their revolutions. Arab women, like all women around the world, have a crucial role in shaping the evolution of their societies and hence the future of their countries. We need to ensure that women's voices remain at the heart of the transformation process, so that Southern Mediterranean countries continue to strengthen the inclusive nature of the transition and respond to the calls of Arab women for dignity. I hope that Spring Forward will be a significant boost in this endeavour²⁸.

In effect, this has meant that in the wake of the Arab revolutions the European Union, in cooperation with its member states and other international partners, has acted to address the role of local civil society organizations as major players in the process of reforms and changes taking place in the Neighbourhood countries²⁹. Nevertheless, by managing the reinforcement of civil society and citizens' participation in the democratic transition processes, similar policies can be called into question, since they have engendered further forms of dependency and have increased pressures on the region.

Related to the debate on democratization and the human rights agenda in the Arab world, the role of international aid has been often criticised as being far away from the local setting, and pushing the participants towards a process of professionalization and bureaucratization of civil society. Similarly in Tunisia, the dependence on foreign funding has produced distorted consequences, making it difficult for autonomous politics to operate in such a context. As Salih and Labidi have already called attention to in their researches, international funding has put pressure on the advancement of transnational women's initiatives, by generating new kinds of asymmetric relationships. This has often meant that the most valuable founding principles of women's activism, that is their autonomy from both internal and international powers, has been compromised.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the revolution, Tunisian women's political activism can be seen to have played a prominent role and to have taken diverse directions towards restructuring the significance of women's engagement with civil society. This political activism has been involved in two interrelated battles, one with the traditional patriarchal system, and one to pursue the liberation of the country following decades of dictatorship. As the director of the *Institut CREDIF*, Dalenda Larguèche, has written in an editorial published in their quarterly review:

²⁸ Stefan Füle, *EU Press Release* (Brussels, 17 October 2012).

²⁹ Considered to be a fundamental EU standpoint, the support to civil society aims at developing advocacy, monitoring and participating effectively in policy dialogues. This can be also implemented through the assistance of EU political parties, trade unions, foundations and relevant NGOs. See *Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions: A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity With the Southern Mediterranean* (Brussels, 8 March 2011).

We believe that our society is suffering from a deep identitarian discourse that has put once again on the public scene the women's issue of their rights and roles. [...] Women from institutions, associations, political parties, syndicates are determined to write down their rights for a renewed Tunisia and to reinforce their struggle for equality. Equality of rights, of opportunities, this is the real object of reaching citizen equality for the entire society.

(Larguèche, 2012: 3-4)

Equality of rights and of opportunities does in fact remain the key issue for the accomplishment of a transition in which the whole of the Tunisian people is involved. Larguèche's analysis gives a detailed representation of the reality experienced by Tunisian women, in which they suggest moving beyond past and present struggles, to fight above all against the lack of security, the increase of violence and fear in the future, and to weather the political turmoil. In relation to a broader picture of the most recent worldwide revolts, Tunisian women's initiatives can be described by using what has been called 'presentism' in order to point up the inclusion of heterogeneous women's experiences at the specific time of the revolution³⁰. This has been true for those Tunisian women activists who have provided a multifaceted presence in the protests, as the interviewees have illustrated the fact that women from different histories, backgrounds, social classes, religious beliefs and political engagements have been united in common actions. Despite their strong cohesion during the earliest phases of the uprising, just a few months after Ben Ali's downfall some divergences based on the differences listed in the previous sentence have progressively emerged.

Contrasting such internal divisions can be crucial to overcoming the misleading dichotomy between modernity, Islam and tradition in order to understand in depth the transitional process in which all Tunisian women are involved. Women's rights have become the core issue at the center of the agenda for an egalitarian society both at grassroots and institutional level, but it is also necessary to take account of the emerging political role of Islamic women's organizations. In fact, excluding either one side or the other is not possible, since the majority of women activists interviewees have stressed their belief in struggling for their rights in terms of these rights belonging to all Tunisian women as a common denominator of the country. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Iqbal Al Gharbi:

At present, there are neither common initiatives nor projects between Islamic women and secular women. Even though the vice-President of the Assembly, Meherzia Labidi-Maiza from *Ennahda*, has suggested creating a united working group between Islamic and secular women, such an idea has never been applied to the current reality. In my opinion, it is difficult since they have very different projects regarding our society. However, we need to find out a common ground where all Tunisian women could work together to face such ongoing challenges and obstacles³¹.

³⁰ Scholars Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand have spoken of such specificities in relation to the Arab revolutions, explaining that 'people did not protest for their own sake and interests alone. They were unified and willing to assume the attendant risks for other socially vulnerable segments of society. [...] Presentism is a philosophy that stresses the priority of the present as well as method of deliberation and dialogue chosen by the people occupying public squares: action is here and now, no deferral is acceptable' (2012).

³¹ Interview with Iqbal Al Gharbi, Tunis, February 20, 2013.

The most recent reality has shown the different ways in which secular and religious women activists have experienced their own conflicts, with the former accusing the latter of not doing enough to defend the well-established women's constitutional rights, and the latter pointing the finger at the elitist perspective offered by the former. In a situation of post-revolutionary socio-political transformations, a complete freedom of expression in Tunisia has not yet been achieved, while increasing episodes of political violence, leading up to the assassination of the leaders of the *Unified Democratic Nationalist* party Chokri Belaid and of the *People's Movement* Mohammed Brahmi, have engendered more instability and uncertainty in the transitional process. However, the contribution of women to the revolution should be considered from a wide ranging perspective, given that they have been an inspirational source for the reformist movements and for the intellectual renaissance of the country, whilst seeking to further their historic issues about women's role in the family as well as in the public sphere.

As for the intricate matter of international aid, in the aftermath of the uprising, a number of grassroots associations and NGOs have been influenced by external donors through the imposition of projects and programs which were not well-contextualized within the complex situation on the ground. In the majority of cases (and what has emerged from the interviewees) Tunisian women activists have preferred to continue joint initiatives with the international partners they have previously engaged with, rather than starting new forms of cooperation, maintaining a critical view of the significance of international aid. In such a pathway, Tunisian women activists are also facing up to another challenge in the quest for justice and non-discrimination. At the center of their efforts to move forward with a democratic transition, a few examples of transnational politics involving Tunisian women and other activists from different regions in the world have emerged. As demonstrated during the World Social Forum organized in Tunis in March 2013, on the one hand women's political participation has been carried on whilst preserving most legal and social gains achieved over the years and, on the other hand, it has encouraged further struggles against any patriarchal perspective.

Although a general scepticism along with worries about the future may inhibit further improvement of rights and freedom, the majority of the women interviewees firmly believe in keeping on with their actions, striving towards women's citizenship as a guarantee of human rights and an essential contribution to democracy, and seeking to involve younger generations of women in the daily politics of their society. Towards such a prospect, this ongoing process can be recognized as an advance, in spite of a number of imperfections and future challenges which have to be faced in moving to the new direction in which the whole country should be heading.

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Interviewees:

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- Alhem Belhadi, Tunis, February 20, 2013.
- Souha Ben Othman, Tunis, February 14, 2013.
- Mounira Ben Kaddour, Tunis, February 21, 2013.
- Amel Grami, Tunis, February 21, 2013.
- Gianandrea Villa, Tunis, February 18, 2013.
- Mounira Yacoub, Tunis, February 13, 2013.