

Interview

# Tunisia's fight against fundamentalism

Friday 11 October 2013, by [BENNOUNE Karima](#), [GRAMI Amel](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2013).

**In conversations with Karima Bennoune over the past two months, Tunisian intellectual Amel Grami shares her analysis of the political crisis in Tunisia during the rule of the Ennahda party, and the strategies needed to defeat fundamentalism.**

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**July 8, 2013**

**Karima Bennoune: Could you describe the current situation and the biggest challenges for women activists and secularists now?**

Amel Grami: The main subject is civil liberties and how to survive the current wave of violence against women. There is tension vis-à-vis women in terms of their clothes, their life-style, etc. For example, swimming in Ramadan causes problems now for some women. It is a new phenomenon in Tunisia - this new relationship with the body and the feeling that in the public sphere you are not free. There are others who are using violence in order to "correct" the behavior of women [1]. It is not possible any more for women activists to travel around the country on their own at night or to go to rural areas, especially to some areas where fundamentalists impose their rule, such as rural areas near Bizerte where there is reported to be Salafist controlled territory or "Imara Salafya". Tunisia is not the same as it was two years ago. We do not have the same freedom of movement.

**KB: What has given you this fear that impedes your mobility?**

AG: Some activists who are well known have received death threats, so we cannot go to these areas without risking our lives. And secondly, there is now a division of space, and many areas dominated by Salafists are deliberately avoided. A small number of people who use violence have become powerful, and even the policemen are afraid. Yesterday, for example, a group of artists were arrested in El Kef [2] for performing a play about the February 2013 assassination of human rights lawyer Chokri Belaid. Facebook publications reported that the judge was close to the Salafists. It is a real challenge, for activists, intellectuals, journalists, and even for artists. Different areas are increasingly falling under the domination of some groups. Even during protests, the streets are divided and you cannot for instance, be around an area where Ennahda militants are protesting. Some journalists, women activists and opposition leaders can be verbally and even physically assaulted. The most important thing is the question of how we can live together, how to transcend fragmentation. The Ennahda party is using the "Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution," [3] (groups of Islamist vigilantes) as well as its own members to engage in violence against journalists, against intellectuals, to defend its territory. They are here to make sure it is impossible to cross borders.

**KB: You have said that gender equality is not possible without separation of religion and**

**state. Can you explain?**

AG: Look at the debate in the Constituent Assembly where women from the Ennahda party defended the “complementarity” of women. Secondly, consider CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) [4]. The women from the Ennahda party organized a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Women under the slogan: “If you commit adultery, you should be punished.” Some said CEDAW means SIDA (the French-language acronym for AIDS) because it supposedly promotes sexual relations outside of marriage. This new strategy is used not only by the Ennahda party but by the Muslim Brothers everywhere. There is no more balance between international laws and national laws, but there is a desire to make the whole region be guided by local laws, and Islamic laws. The ruling party’s strategy is hiding behind words, for example saying, “We agree with liberties but on one condition - if they are not against local tradition.” It is no longer just double discourse, but multiple discourse.

**KB: In light of the fraught climate that you describe and the pressure the Ennahda party puts on secular Tunisians, what do you think of the fact that the Western media continues to dub the party “moderate”?**

AG: They have manufactured this notion of “moderate Islam,” and of “democracy compatible with Islam.” But, what we witnessed this year was that Ennahda’s dream of an Islamic state is being realized, step by step. They are busy “defending the sacred,” sentencing someone who declared his atheism to seven years in jail for expressing his beliefs. There is no room for art, for differences, for tolerance. In the West, they often talk about Ennahda as homogeneous, but what we witnessed this year was fragmentation inside the party. Even inside Ennahda we find a radical grouping. This includes, for example, Sadok Chourou, a member of the Constituent Assembly, and Habib Ellouze. The latter is a member of the Constituent Assembly, and at the same time a fundamentalist. He appeared in some Ennahda gatherings, meetings and videos calling for ‘purification’ of the media, and purification of intellectuals, and inviting preachers from Egypt and the Gulf to promote Female Genital Mutilation and the veil. Sadok Chourou also called for the application of hudud punishments (corporal punishments like flogging and stoning derived from Muslim laws), and for dealing with demonstrators by cutting off their hands and their legs according to Islamic law. So, who exactly is moderate? A woman member of the Constituent Assembly from the Ennahda party called for segregation of beaches and of public transportation. The Radical wing inside the “Shura Council” (which leads Ennahda) is quite influential.

**KB: How worried are you about the armed groups that have been active near the Algerian border, about organized terrorism?**

AG: The armed groups are well organized. During the first year of the revolution when we were having our carnival, and dreaming about our revolution, they organized themselves. They benefitted from this period of disorder, so nowadays they are everywhere.

**KB: Many of the issues you are addressing played out on the Manouba University campus from November 2011 to March 2012 when your premises were taken over by those whom Dean Habib Kazdaghli described as “enemies of an enlightened and modern Tunisia.” Can you summarize these events which your colleague Habib Mellakh labeled a “catastrophic situation” in his book “Chroniques du Manoubistan”? [5]**

AG: It started with a call from certain mosques for people to go to Manouba University and oppose the work done there by secular intellectuals who are “against Islam.” Most of those involved in the takeover were outsiders, not students. They began by blocking access to our classes [6]. So, there was no way to have courses until they would leave. Some people in the neighborhood surrounding

the university trusted their Imams when they said that Manouba is under the power of people who hate Islam. They labeled what they did for the benefit of Islam and the revival of Islam in this university. They targeted Manouba because it is well known for its modernist Islamic studies and for re-interpreting the Qur'an. I myself wrote about apostasy in Islam, and about the marriage of non-Muslim men and Muslim women. I finally concluded that it is not forbidden under Islam and Sharia for women to marry non-Muslim men. This new reading disturbed the fundamentalists.

One day, in November 2011, I arrived on campus to find someone giving a sermon and calling on the students to throw Amel Grami out of the university. Luckily, they did not recognize me, but they denounced me because I am supposedly against Islam, because I teach comparative religion, and according to them I stand with the Jews and Christians, so I am against Islam. And that year I was teaching another course about feminism, so I am the "bad girl of Islam." That is how it started. By the end of the day, there was a clash.

A group of Salafists tried to have an appointment with the Dean. They demanded a prayer room on campus, segregation between men and women, and that female professors only teach female students. Within two months, the campus was under the control of the Salafists. We were kicked off our own campus and they were inside playing football. It was reported that some even engaged in sex with their partners, whom they married according to customary laws. One female sit-iner was taken to hospital when on hunger strike and was found to be pregnant. The authorities refused to intervene because, they argued, it was an ideological debate. The son of Ali Larayedh (the then Minister of the Interior from Ennahda) was there with the Salafist activists.

**KB: What was the response of the students?**

AG: It took time for them to become aware about the real project of the Salafist groups, and about what it would mean if Manouba fell under their control, which would mean that all the universities would be. What happened here was a test, and our resistance was also a message for the other faculties about what is at stake: our future and our academic freedom. It is our role as professors to defend the future of education. It all came to a head on March 7, 2012, when the Salafists lowered the Tunisian flag over the university and raised their own black flag.

**KB: When this occurred, it turned the Tunisian population decisively against the Salafist occupiers. In what became an iconic gesture, a woman student defied the Salafists, climbed on the roof and put the national flag back up. The occupiers lost at Manouba, despite the utter failure of the authorities to intervene to stop them. However, the university community had already suffered months of harm. Can you describe what that time was like for you and your colleagues?**

AG: There were repeated acts of violence against professors. For example, they used a knife on one colleague to try to force her to accept students wearing the niqab.

**KB: Habib Mellakh writes that the Salafist occupiers warned that damnation and hell would be the fate of women students who "go naked" - which in the Salafist lexicon is a synonym for showing one's face. They particularly targeted women, it seems.**

AG: Yes. I myself was surrounded by a group of students and their supporters and told to "dégage" - get out - (the anti-Ben Ali slogan of the 2011 revolution). It hurts, these groups of students considering that you are evil, you are "Aytem França"- the orphans of France, that you are representing the West. I cannot forget this event. Some of them used the threat of rape against me. I spent my life teaching values, and I am a member of many groups for interfaith dialogue. My whole project is the right to be different and the philosophy of differences in terms of race, class, gender,

religion. Then, finally, I found myself the other. And, after the revolution no less.

**KB: Can you explain the heroic role of Dean Habib Kazdaghli in successfully resisting the Salafist take over?**

AG: He spent months organizing demonstrations, press conferences, petitions, calling on civil society and intellectuals to support us [7], with the help of journalists and opposition politicians. It was not easy. It was another form of struggle. Despite what we did, and the fact that we took back our campus, the struggle for academic freedom in Tunisia continues. Just this month, there was an incident at Jendouba University in northwest Tunisia, near Algeria. Groups of Salafists – most from outside the university – blockaded it to protest the punishment of some Salafist students who violated the law, and they managed to stop all classes. Exams could not be held, and the students risked losing the entire year as a result. There was no intervention from the police. So, we are in a critical period. The Salafists believe they are above the law and operate in impunity. This view was strengthened by the fact that those who attacked the U.S. embassy (on September 14, 2012 during the furor over the film “The Innocence of Muslims”) got a six month suspended sentence – they were not punished [8].

**KB: Could an Islamic state actually be established in Tunisia?**

AG: If liberal forces are weak, and operate without a clear strategy, we will lose.

**KB: What are the best ways to make sure that does not happen? What are the best ways now to fight against fundamentalist ideologies in Tunisia?**

AG: The whole problem is that we do not have an ideology. The Islamists have this power to talk with people and most importantly, they have money. Money came to support them from all the fundamentalists in the world for the “free and transparent” 2011 elections. What do you do when some parties have the money to buy elections, and to organize, and the other parties are weak and have no money? Now, they also have clandestine armed wings, like the Muslim Brotherhood does everywhere. If they have violence and money on their side, how are we going to have elections?

**KB: What percentage of the population do you think supports the fundamentalists now, and what percentage of the population supports secularism?**

AG: People are fed up because there is a lack of vision about economic issues. We all failed – secular parties and liberals – because we are trying to talk about concepts, about the constitution. So, many common people have decided that they will not vote. Moreover, people are no longer interested in Ennahda either. They want someone to solve their economic problems, and that is all.

**KB: What is your life like now, especially since the assassination of Chokri Belaid in February?**

AG: I have been so depressed by all of this. I am no longer able to do my work as an academic since the revolution. I cannot actually produce writings that offer in-depth analysis. From the personal point of view, I do not have enough time with my children, or with my husband. I am entirely consumed with the struggle. And I must deal with the threats for the last two or three months. After the assassination of Chokri Belaid, I spoke on television about the fundamentalist project to create an Islamic state and then I received death threats. My telephone is tapped, and my Email. I have often received Facebook messages containing insults and defamation. It is as though I am back in the Ben Ali years.

**KB: What can progressive activists elsewhere do to support people like you in Tunisia now?**

AG: Maybe the best thing is to document these events and issues since we do not have time to write about our experience with our everyday life. Writers need to show people that behind this successful story of revolution we find a group of women who spent their lives fighting in order to maintain their rights - not only to have more rights but to just maintain those we had - and that we are looking for a better future for the new generation.

### **August 12, 2013**

KB: How have you experienced the time since the July 25 assassination of Mohamed Brahmi?

AG: Brahmi was a member of the Constituent Assembly which is drafting a new constitution. He and his Popular Front party were outspoken against the Islamist Ennahda party, whom Brahmi's family is accusing [9] of being behind the assassination. The killing came as Tunisia celebrated the anniversary of independence from France.

As a Tunisian intellectual and citizen I was pleased by the demonstrations [10] organized after this assassination by the democratic opposition in front of the Constituent Assembly building. The protestors criticized Ennahda for not cracking down on hard-line extremists, who have been blamed for many acts of violence in the last few years. Yet, the most serious challenge for Ennahda has been controlling the extremists among its own leaders. Ennahda has also been criticized for allowing a growing Islamization of the country, and for its tolerance of extremist groups, including the Salafists and jihadists who were recruiting young men to fight in Syria and recruiting Tunisian women to have sexual intercourse with these "mujahidin," and groups threatening women who worked outside the home or were unveiled.

I was very impressed by the role played by the family of the martyr Brahmi and particularly his wife Mbarka Brahmi, a courageous woman who demanded the resignation of the Tunisian government and the Constituent Assembly and called for real change in Tunisia, declaring that Ennahda is not a moderate party but an extremist movement with a violent past [11].

### **KB: What should the strategy be to counter Tunisian fundamentalists in this new phase?**

AG: There is no choice for Tunisians. They must resist and fight for a better future for their children. I keep in mind what Tahar Djaout, an Algerian journalist murdered by Muslim fundamentalists in May 1993 said: "If you speak out, they will kill you. If you keep silent, they will kill you. So speak out, and die." All Tunisians - intellectuals, artists, journalists - should assume their responsibility to spread awareness, to promote a culture of peace, and advance a moderate interpretation of religious texts and modern education.

### **KB: What are your hopes and fears for Tunisia now?**

AG: Among my most important fears is that Ennahda is placing more of its members in top government positions. The opposition is concerned that the results of the next election will be tampered with. Power still remains concentrated in the hands of Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leader. My hopes are that a new government could somehow succeed in establishing peace, and controlling the extremists, and would work for the interests of all of Tunisia.

### **September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

KB: How do you assess Ennahda's reported agreement, announced on September 28<sup>th</sup>, to step down in response to massive protests against its rule, and as part of a transitional process? Do you think this will actually transpire?

AG: Since the beginning of the opposition movement which called for the dissolution of the government, establishing a government of technocrats, canceling the appointment of Ennahda partisans in key public positions, and even the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, Ennahda's reaction remained ambiguous [12] and reflected the divided views within the party itself. Some defended the legitimacy of the government and the Constituent Assembly, while others feared the Egyptian scenario, namely impeachment. Rached Ghannouchi's statements made after meeting with their number one foe - Nida Tunis leader Beji Caid Essebsi - in Paris, reiterated a commitment to compromise and consensus both in the drafting of the Constitution and also in the transition. Meanwhile, other leading figures in Ennahda rejected the call to resign. As recently as this week, Harouni, the Ennahda Minister of Transport and a member of the Shura Council, said that their being in power is not just a matter of legitimacy and elections, but is a divine mission above all laws and the Constitution.

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## **P.S.**

\* Open Democracy, 7 October 2013:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/amel-grami-karima-bennoune/tunisia-fight-against-fundamentalism-interview-with-amel-grami>

\* Karima Bennoune carried out this interview while in Tunisia doing follow up research to her book, "Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism."

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF (article 29998), [Tunisia, Ennahda Party and the Salafists: 'The Arab Revolutions Have Triggered A Male Identity Crisis'](#).

[2] <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/U-S-must-support-Tunisia-s-secularists-4261703.php>

[3] See on ESSF (article 29999), [Tunisia: What are the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution?](#).

[4] <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

[5] See in French on ESSF (article 30000), [En Tunisie, le rude combat contre les islamistes du « Manoubistan »](#).

[6] [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/world/africa/tensions-at-manouba-university-mirror-turbulence-in-tunisia.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/world/africa/tensions-at-manouba-university-mirror-turbulence-in-tunisia.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)

[7] <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/africa/2013/05/02/Tunisia-dean-acquitted-of-veiled-woman-assault-.html>

[8] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/29/us-tunisia-us-embassy-idUSBRE94S10Y20130529>

[9] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/opinion/killing-the-arab-spring-in-its-cradle.html>

[10] <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/08/14/is-this-the-end-of-the-arab-spring/democracy-activists-must-reclaim-a-co-opted-movement>

[11] See on ESSF (article 30002), [Your fatwa does not apply here – Women resisting far right fundamentalisms](#).

[12] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24385363>