Islamic Perspectives in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

The Work of Olfa Youssef

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Abstract

This paper seeks to be a corrective to the common yet erroneous perception that after the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia is witnessing a battle between pro-Islam forces on one side and secular ones on the other. The paper argues that some of the policies of the Tunisian government since independence have triggered a process that created a complex field of negotiation around what Islam means and how it ought to guide Tunisian society. The work of Olfa Youssef provides an example of how the field of interpreting Islam has expanded, creating a unique space of intelligibility that challenges our understanding of what Islam entails in modern contexts.

Keywords: Qur’anic hermeneutics, reform, linguistics, psychoanalysis, modern Muslim intellectuals

Introduction

It was not a surprise for any observer of the Tunisian scene that the Islamist al-Nahda party would be a significant force within the political map of the country in the aftermath of the recent Jasmine Revolution and the demise of the Bin ‘Ali regime. That Islam would endure as an important component of Tunisian society was not a matter of dispute among experts. However, many have continued to speak in dichotomous terms about the role of Islam in this context. One particularly persistent dichotomy in the coverage of the Tunisian situation posits two poles: Islamists, seeking the imposition of Islam and the establishment
of Sharī‘a on one side, and secularists, aiming at keeping religion out of politics, on the other side.

I would suggest that this frame of analysis is flawed because it posits as a starting point a very simplistic picture, the result of which is an inadequate analysis of the contemporary realities of Tunisian society. This paper provides a corrective lens, taking a particular angle to highlight the complexity of what is occurring in the country regarding the role of religion. I argue that some of the policies of the Tunisian government, since the independence of the country in the mid-twentieth century, have played an important role in setting up the current intensification of debates about Islamic norms and how they ought to guide Tunisian society. Rather than seeing Tunisian Islamists as the spokespersons for Islam against the claims and political aspirations of secularists, an analysis of the work and careers of many Tunisian thinkers shows that the field of “Islam” is much more nuanced. The intellectual intervention of scholar Olfa Youssef provides an example of how the field of interpreting Islam in Tunisia has expanded and become very sophisticated, creating a unique space of intelligibility that challenges the common understanding of Islam and what it entails in modern contexts.

The Impact of Būrgība’s Reforms

The period of the French protectorate over Tunisia (1881-1956) created a situation in which the dominance of traditional religious institutions slowly eroded. Of particular interest for this paper are two elements. First, the French control of Tunisia highlighted for the locals the huge gap between them and the materially and militarily superior Europeans. This reality became an impetus for a reassessment of the self. Second, the monopoly of the ‘ulamā‘ (traditionally-trained religious scholars) on the production of knowledge was severely challenged and their privileged presence in the judiciary and the affairs of waqf (religious endowments) was significantly disrupted (Nafi: 6). Secular schools were introduced in this period and Tunisian elites had access to modern knowledge and a chance to pursue advanced studies in France.

Consequently, the Tunisian nationalist aspirations for independence from the French developed in a context of competition between elites, shaped by their differing educational backgrounds and ideological leanings. However, it would be a mistake to assert that some were pro-Islam and others were anti-Islam. Rather, it is more accurate to view the colonial experience as providing new lenses through which Islam would be seen within the Tunisian intellectual scene for many decades. In the process, this scene was also influenced by the ideas of reformist thinkers, like the famed Egyptian Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) who visited Tunisia on more than one occasion (Nafi: 9). ‘Abduh’s views intensified a rift among the ‘ulamā‘, which had already started with the Ottoman reforms of Khayr al-Dīn (d. 1890), between the reform-oriented and the conservatives (Hourani: 84-94). By the time that the Tunisian nationalist movement became a force within the French Protectorate, the situation was even more complex in terms of what Islamic reform entailed.

The first leader of the independent Tunisian state was al-Ḥābib Būrgība, a nationalist hero, astute politician, and Sorbonne University graduate in law and political science (Salem: 70-73). In the wake of independence, he implemented a daring reform project. The 1956
Code of Personal Status included such controversial elements as the banning of polygamy. Būrgība pushed for gender equality (Tchaicha and Arfaoui: 218-19), and insisted on the necessity of a unified legal structure that is not only an Islamic reformist project but one that marries Tunisian Islamic identity to the requirements of the age. Būrgība’s self-chosen nickname was al-mujāhid al-akbar (the one engaged in the greater jihād), highlighting that he was involved in an Islamic struggle to make Tunisia a developed modern nation (Lee: 160). In addition, he sought the support of some important ‘ulamā’ for the new legislation, including Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, the celebrated author of the commentary on the Qur’an, entitled al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr, and the influential treatise on Islamic law, Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘a. In a very symbolic gesture, Ibn ‘Āshūr stood at Būrgība’s side at the introduction of the Code (Nafi: 12).

Furthermore, Būrgība integrated al-Zaytūna, the prestigious traditional religious school, into the secular educational system in the early 1960s, making it a college within the new Tunisian university. I would argue that this action was central to long term implications in the leveling of the field of Islamic interpretation. The modern university system would ultimately start creating scholars in the humanities and social sciences who focused on various elements of Islam and Islamic history as research topics beyond the limits of traditional perspectives. The scope and quality of the educational projects set Tunisia apart among all Arab nations. This is an important point to bear in mind as the young Tunisian nation continued to grow. It is important to note, however, that Būrgība was an autocrat who imposed his political will on the country and sought to outmaneuver any potential challengers (Lee: 159-61).

The Islamists and the State

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, during an acute economic crisis facing the country, Būrgība not only had to deal with a highly dissatisfied public but the leftist threat that was sweeping large parts of the so-called developing world (Boulby: 601). As a result, he made concessions to the more traditionally-oriented ‘ulamā’ and gave more room to neo-fundamentalist preachers with the hope of swaying the youth away from the revolutionary potential of leftist ideologies (Lee: 160). Al-Zaytūna was revitalized and some of its younger leaders were becoming very popular; they established Ḥalaqāt ‘ilm (teaching circles) to spread their interpretation of Islam among the populace.

During this time the eventual co-founder of al-Nahḍa, Rāshid al-Ghannūshī returned from Syria and joined the effort of “Islamization” (Boulby: 600). By the late 1970s, this movement had become more politicized and was emboldened by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that brought Khomeini to power. The opposition’s rhetoric grew sharper. Al-Ghannūshī established al-Ītijāh al-Islāmī, a group that aimed to achieve “the renewal of the Tunisian Islamic personality, the revival of Islamic thought and principles in order to conduct the battle against centuries of societal decadence; . . . and . . . the revival of Islam’s political identity at local, North African and global levels” (Boulby: 604). In most Arab countries, the governments realized that the new threat to their authoritarian regimes was the Islamist movement.
Bürgiba had to hit this new opposition hard and he did not shy away from using very repressive measures. Al-Ghannūshī and many others were thrown in prison. However, while this policy prevented Islamists from open political participation, it also increased their popularity and appeal among the populace. As many analysts suggest, the increasingly aggressive and, perhaps, senile Bürgiba would have pushed the country into a chaotic political situation had not a soft coup been executed by the Prime Minister, Zin al-‘Ābidīn Bin ‘Alī, who became second president of independent Tunisia.

Bin ‘Alī was keen to deal with the growing influence of political Islam in a different way, at least initially. Islamists were released from prison, al-Zaytūnā regained a degree of autonomy, allowing it to start issuing traditional ġāzāt (traditional degrees) once more, and mosques received larger financial support (Lee: 160). It was, however, only a matter of time before the regime realized that the attempt to out-Islamize the Islamists was expanding the latter’s reach within Tunisian society. The relative success of the al-Nahḍa party, the heir of al-İttijāḥ al-Islāmī, in the 1989 parliamentary elections triggered a new round of repressive actions by the government. Al-Ghannūshī fled to London, where he would stay in exile until after the 2011 revolution.

It is clear from the above that Islam never ceased to play a central role in the political and social debates of post-colonial Tunisia. If anything, as decades passed, the developing intellectual scene of the country created more avenues for social actors to engage Islam and to consider the various possibilities of what Islamic norms mean in a modern context. Early on, when Bürgiba claimed to be applying ījtihād (independent reasoning) in the development of laws, like the ones enshrined in the Personal Status Code or in his much more controversial call for breaking the Ramadan fast in order to boost production (Halliday: 2013), he was on very flimsy grounds in scholarly terms. He was a skilled political mind that knew how to influence people, but often had to rely extensively on the power of the state to impose his will. In contrast, the aforementioned rise of critical studies of Islam within departments of the humanities and social sciences produced scholars who were more qualified to interpret traditional readings than earlier experts. I suggest that it is within this framework that one could locate the origins of the battles of Islamic interpretations in post-revolutionary Tunisia. As an alternative to the Islamist perspective in both its moderate wing, espoused by al-Nahḍa leaders, and more conservative views of the salafīs, stand the growing scholarly output of researchers like Nājīa al-Wārīmī Bū‘jīla, al-Munṣīf b. ‘Abd al-Jalīl, Bassām al-Jamal, Zahīyya Jwūrū, Muḥammad al-Ḥaddād, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Būḥāhā, Āmāl Qarāmī, Balqīs al-Rażīqī, Nādir al-Hammāmī, and many others.

In order to highlight how new scholars,¹ have reshaped the debate on the role of Islam and the way to interpret it, I will consider the work of Olfa Youssef. Not only is Youssef an accomplished scholar who seriously challenges traditional hermeneutics, she has also popularized her work and gained a following within Tunisia and in the wider Arab world.

¹ In his excellent article, “Tunisian Intellectuals: Responses to Islamism,” Robert Lee speaks of the “professors,” but he focuses on a handful of academics, most of them trained in Europe and who were visible in the era of the old regime. I see the process as involving a larger numbers of university graduates in the humanities and social sciences in Tunisia who are shaping the field of Islamic studies today.
The Qur’an and Linguistic Ambiguity in the Work of Olfa Youssef

Olfa Youssef (also spelled Ulfa Yūṣuf), was born in Soussa, Tunisia in the 1960s. After completing primary education at al-Maḥāṭṭa School and secondary schooling at the Institute of al-Tāḥir al-Ṣfar, she continued her advanced education at the Higher Institute of Teachers in Soussa and graduated in 1987 as a teacher of Arabic language and literature. She became a professor at the University of Manouba in 1989 and hosted television programs starting in 1994. In 2002, she received a Ph.D. in Arabic language and civilization, and then joined the Higher Institute of Childhood Education as director in 2003. She became professor at the Higher Institute of Languages in Tunis in 2007 and general director of the National Library in 2008, a position from which she resigned a few months after the Revolution, citing an unhealthy work environment as the main reason for her decision (2011). Youssef is the author of a number of books, including al-Ikhbār ‘anīl-mar’a fil-Qur’ān wal-sunna (1997), Ta’addud al-ma’nā fil-Qur’ān (2003), Nāqisāt ‘aql wa dīn (2003), Le Coran au risque de la psychanalyse (2007), Ḥayrat muslima (2008), and Shawq: Qirā’ā fī arkān al-islām (2010).

Before discussing the work of Olfa Youssef, it is worth noting that central to the intellectual production of almost all the new scholars and across academic disciplines is a critical recognition of the radical historicity of human life. An important part of their critique of traditional scholars is the latter’s lack of historical contextualization on the one hand and their downplaying of the role of the human subject in the interpretation of sacred texts on the other. New scholars are aware that both contextualization of Qur’anic verses through asbāb al-nuzūl (the occasions of revelation literature) and awareness of human fallibility (in accepting a multiplicity of legal interpretations within four “orthodox” schools) were part of the traditional scholarly heritage. However, they point to the limited character of such conceptualizations. Importantly, they also highlight that the modern representatives of that heritage have impoverished the traditionally complex scholarly discussions, partly as a result of the influence of the ubiquitous “fundamentalist” trend within modern Islam and its drive for simplicity.

Youssef’s work is a good illustration of the methods of the new scholars. She harnesses modern linguistics, semiology, and psychoanalysis to both deconstruct traditional interpretations and propose new avenues to pursue in reading the religious texts. Youssef’s doctorate thesis is an inquiry into the multiplicity of meaning in the Qur’an (ta’addud al-ma’nā fil-Qur’ān). In it, as well as in what might be considered her best work to date, Le Coran au risque de la psychanalyse, Youssef highlights that the Qur’an “preferred on many occasions the alternative of ambiguity to that of clarity” (2007: 19). Her discussion of this ambiguous character of the Qur’an focuses on Q 3:7 which was at the heart of many debates in classical Islamic exegesis and theology. The verse states that “it is he [God] who sent down the book, in it there are clear verses (āyāt muḥkamāt) that are the mother of the book and others are ambiguous (mutashābiḥāt). As for those in whose hearts there is deviancy (zaygh), they follow that which is ambiguous (mā tashābaha minhu) in order to create dissention (al-fitna) and in order to interpret it (ta’wilīhi), and none knows its interpretation except God and those who are firm in knowledge (al-rāṣikhūn fil-ilm) they say, ‘we believe in it, all of it is from our Lord.’” Following in the footsteps of premodern exegetes and theologians, Youssef explains that there is disagreement as to whether only God knows the
interpretation of the *mutashābihāt* or if “those who are firm in knowledge” also have access to that interpretation. Importantly, she notes that this verse could have been worded differently if the goal was to avoid ambiguity. According to the author, the ambiguity of this verse is deliberate. For Youssef, ambiguity is a constant feature of the Qur’an (2007: 19).

The notion of ambiguity is central to Youssef’s work in general. I would argue that it is the door through which she forcefully enters the debate room with traditionalist interpretations of Islam. In other words, Youssef is keen to show that all interpretations are relative, including the ones that have been accepted as authoritative within the four *madhāhib* (legal schools). She makes the case for this through a variety of means. First, she explains that there are two methods of analysis of linguistic statements. One is the semantic method, which seeks to elucidate the relation between the “signifier” and the “signified” or that between a number of “signifieds” within the same statement. The second is the pragmatic method, which deals with the meaning of the statement in its relation to the speaker, the receiver, and the *sitz im leben*. Youssef insists that the ambiguity of the Qur’an is both at the semantic and pragmatic levels and that it is both a deliberate choice and a product of inherent characters within human language (2007: 20).

Examples of semantic ambiguities abound. Youssef groups them into two categories – particular ambiguity and global ambiguity. Particular ambiguity concerns a word or verse in isolation, and global ambiguity stems from the contradiction between two or more verses. Interestingly, Youssef chooses controversial and highly relevant topics to illustrate her points. This includes issues like the *ḥijāb*, the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man, the notion of *nushūz* (a wife’s disobedience of husband), the prohibition of wine, *jihād*, and freedom of conscience. For instance, on the prohibition of the marriage between a Muslim woman and a man of the *ahl al-Kitāb* (people of the Book i.e. Jews and Christians), Youssef considers that the verse upon which Muslim jurists built their ruling is one that contains what is termed in semantics “the fuzziness of categories.” Q 60:10 states, “O you who believe, when the believing women come to you as emigrants, test them, and God knows their faith best. And if you know them to be believers, then do not return them to the non-believers (kuffār); they are not lawful for them [i.e. for the kuffār], nor are they [i.e. the kuffār] lawful for them [i.e. the believing women].” The term *kuffār* in the text is a “fuzzy category,” as shown by the disagreements among the jurists as to whether Jews and Christians belonged to the *kuffār* or whether the term applies exclusively to the Meccan polytheists. Youssef notes that, in most matters, the majority of the jurists maintained that as people of the Book, neither Jews nor Christians could be called *kuffār*. Yet on this particular issue, jurists claimed *ijmā’* (consensus) in their inclusion of Jews and Christians in the prohibition. This inconsistency shows that the ambiguity of the text was settled in one particular direction because of the patriarchal social mores that shaped the world of the interpretive communities (2007: 25-26). In other words, this particular interpretation closed the various semantic possibilities of the text.

As an example of global semantic ambiguity, Youssef discusses the question of freedom of belief and considers two sets of verses that contradict each other. On one side are verses that appear to highlight liberty of conscience, including Q 2:256, Q 18:29, and Q 10:99. Youssef quotes the exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) who perceived these verses to be in contradiction with the verses that enjoined fighting non-Muslims. These non-Muslims fall...
into one of three categories, the mushrikūn (associators) that must be converted, the murtaddūn (apostates) that must be brought back to the right path, and the ahl al-kitāb (people of the Book) who must submit to Muslim power and pay the jizya (poll-tax). Notwithstanding the few attempts of some jurists to reconcile the two sets of verses, the majority recognized an irreducible contradiction. As a result, they used the concept of naskh (abrogation), according to which the latest verses (the ones espousing conflict) had abrogated the earlier verses on the issue. This came to be the majoritarian position from which dissent had become so hard that someone like the Sudanese thinker Mahmūd Muḥammad Taha, who favored the Meccan verses and rejected that naskh was necessarily diachronic, lost his life after an apostasy trial in 1985 (Youssef 2007: 38-41).

But the ambiguity of the Qur'an, according to Youssef, is not limited to the issue of fuzziness of categories and polysemy in the vocabulary of the speaker. The ambiguity is inherent in human language itself. She writes,

> [t]he construction of every statement, whether affirmative or performative, boils down to weaving more or less complex syntactic and semantic relations between object and attributes. But regardless of the richness of a statement, the latter never exhausts the infinite details of reality; at the same time that one affirms something of the world, one leaves indeterminate a large portion of the real (2007: 43).

Importantly, “language never generates a direct representation of the object that it evokes; it always remains in the domain of representation.” Thus, one can posit, “the cleavage between language and reality is the necessary condition of the existence of any form of symbolization.” Accordingly, Youssef proposes that the Arabic language of the Qur’an, being a human language, remains incomplete and unable to catch reality. If a complete divine language exists and is able to catch reality in its totality, it is inaccessible to human intellect and as such cannot be what is contained in the text of the Muṣḥaf (Qur’anic codex)(2007: 46).

**Psychoanalysis and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts**

Youssef’s focus on the characteristics of language to problematize the interpretation of the sacred texts is reminiscent of the work of the late Egyptian scholar Naṣr Hāmed Abū Zayd (d. 2010). Without denying the divine origin of the Qur’an, Abū Zayd argued that the Qur’an was a cultural product (muntaj thaqāfī) (130-31). What makes Abū Zayd, Youssef, and those who take similar approaches uniquely challenging to traditional readings is that they move beyond historicizing the religious interpretations of premodern Muslim jurists, as earlier Muslim modernists had done. Trained in modern linguistics and semiotics, they highlight the historicity of the Qur’anic text itself. In that sense, they might be considered in some ways as the heirs of the Muʿtazīlī legacy, but with tools that were simply not part of the intellectual world of the Muʿtazīla.²

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² Muʿtazīlīsm was an early rationalist theological current in Islam that argued for the Qur’an being created in history as opposed to the view that would become dominant in Sunni Islam, according to which the Qur’an is the eternal uncreated literal word of God.
Youssef’s work is a unique contribution because she introduces the tools of psychoanalysis to her work. She explains that the *fuqahāʾ* (legal scholars) have generally recognized the relative character of their interpretations of the divine will, as can be seen in their insistence on including the phrase *wallahu a’lam* (God knows best) in their legal responsa. Paradoxically, most of them were also keen to refute alternative interpretations. Youssef proposes that this is due to the often unconscious and impetuous need to find the correct meaning of the Qur’an. In this, the Muslim scholars are no different than the masses of believers, particularly in the media saturated modern world that has created a new market for fatwas. Youssef theorizes,

*[i]f the ‘ulamāʾ attempt to give satisfying answers and if Muslims are made keen to ask these questions, it is because both feel the need for definitive answers and being unable to accept the loss of the divine intention, seek to fill the gap that the absence of the original meaning creates (2007: 77).*

This need for a compensating presence stems from the fear of emptiness and absence and is connected to childhood. Youssef highlights Sigmund Freud’s observation about what he termed the *Fort/Da game* of the child, which “introduces a primordial symbolization of leaving and returning and of absence and presence of the mother.” Furthermore, she notes that Jacques Lacan adds that the subject perceives the object that represents the mother as being torn from his own self. Thus, while contingent, the representative object *both fills up* the hole of the absence *and incarnates* it for the subject. In a similar fashion, the ‘ulamāʾ who seek to provide definitive interpretations, as if having access to the absent divine meaning, “compensate for the absence of God in their unconscious and in that of the Muslim masses” (2007: 78).

The dynamic of absence extends even to the Qur’an. According to Youssef, the condition of existence itself is loss of the possible. By coming to life in this world of symbolism, the subject becomes an orphan of the pre-symbolic. Similarly, by becoming language the Qur’an also becomes an orphan of the unspeakable original meaning (2007: 80). In Qur’anic terms, it is by making the *umm al-kitāb* (the Mother of the Book) inaccessible to human beings that the Qur’an can be recited by the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, it is mere illusion on the part of Muslims to perceive themselves as capable of reaching the original meaning of the Qur’an (2007: 81). In addition, perceiving one’s opinion as matching the divine will is a sinful religious act since it can be construed as either a form of disobedience or worse, one of idolatry (2007: 84). Based on this, the dichotomy of divine law/human law is nonsensical and dangerous in the modern context because it perpetuates the illusion that some rule according to the divine law while others prefer human legislation. In reality, those who have power in society impose their interpretation using symbolic or physical force, leading to that interpretation becoming ingrained in the collective memory of Muslims and thus shaping the identity of whole communities. The psychological dynamics of such constructions are so powerful that giving up the illusion would require a severe symbolic separation that would necessarily be followed by mourning.

Mourning entails a process of acceptance and resignation in the face of absence. Its result is “the internalization of the lost object, and the loss is then only at the level of the real presence of the object,” but “every lost object leaves traces that remind [us] of its existence”
(2007: 80). In the case of the divine will, the process of ta'wil (interpretation) ought to be perceived as “a movement of desire towards the original meaning which, like a mirage, will never be reached even though it is the motivation of every movement towards it.” In the Qur’anic text, there is a trace of the umm al-kitāb, a trace of the absolute that is absent; and Muslims long for that absent dimension (2007: 72–73). The relativist attitude that stems from Youssef’s analysis greatly lessens the anxiety connected to implementing the “Law of God.” Instead one is pushed to subjectively listen to and deeply engage the spiritual drive of the Qur’an. It is not rationality that guides this process but the heart. Youssef approvingly quotes the Spanish Sufi master Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) who responded to his critics among the fuqahā’ by mockingly stating that their knowledge came from the dead (i.e. chains of transmission) while his was deposited in the heart by the One who never dies (2007: 106).

Between Scholarly Pursuits and Popular Audiences

It is clear that Youssef is primarily an academic. Like many of the other new Tunisian scholars, her challenge to traditional readings of the sacred texts is increasingly sophisticated. The rigorousness of the interpretive efforts of these scholars is as important as their slowly growing audience. Until recently, much of the influence of alternative “modernist” readings of Islam was limited to the elites. Today, Youssef and others are reaching larger chunks of the Tunisian population. Their success is at least partly the outcome of emulating the style and using the tools of popular religious preachers. It is certainly not possible at this stage of Tunisian history for someone like Youssef to have access to the pulpits. However, this has long ceased to be the unique way to shape the religious understanding of the masses.

There has been in the last two decades an amazing growth in the number of popular televangelists. The so-called al-du’āt al-judud, like the Egyptian ‘Amr Khālid or the Yemeni ‘Alī al-Jifrī, have captivated large audiences in the Arab world and have become as influential as some ‘ulamā’, like the Egyptian Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī or the late Syrian Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būfī (d. 2013) who have had their own programs on satellite television for a long time. Similarly, websites, blogs, and social media sites featuring the writings, lectures, and fatwas of the major preachers have proliferated and have made these preachers more popular than ever before. Additionally, the traditional medium of books continues to be highly relevant, in the form of little booklets that are written in a simple language and that can be read in a very short period of time. Sold everywhere by street merchants and featured prominently within the stock of local bookstores, these small books are inexpensive and very accessible to the average reader.

Olfa Youssef has learned these lessons well and has been able to make use of all these outlets efficiently. She entered the world of television as early as 1994. Over the years, she presented a number of programs, including a series of short religious lectures that can be loosely considered a form of waż (religious advice). Youssef touched upon topics that fit within common themes of religious programming like al-tawāḍu’ (humility), al-‘atā’ wal-infāq (charity), al-qanā’a (content), or al-ihṣān ilāl-wālidayn (kindness to parents). Youssef also did a series on another familiar theme, the life of the Prophet, entitled ‘alā ḥāmis al-sīra. Another series dealt with more provocative topics, like jihād, the concept of womanhood, feelings of guilt, the existence of God, or lex talionis. In most of these television
programs, Youssef mixes traditional themes with modern notions, using a simple yet impeccable Arabic. In addition, after the so-called Arab Spring, Youssef appeared multiple times on Tunisian and Arab Satellite channels, discussing various aspects of her work and often defending herself against her critics, some of whom have sought to discredit her for an alleged close connection to the defunct regime.

Youssef maintains a blog, a very active Facebook page (approaching 200,000 likes) and a Twitter account. Moreover, she published a series of booklets under the general title *Wallahu a’lam* (And God Knows Best) that are written in the form of dialogues between the proponents of competing interpretations of various topics in Islamic law. Some of the titles included in this series include *Fī zawāj al-muslima bil-kitābī* (On the Marriage of the Muslim Woman to a Man of the Book), *Fī ta’addud al-zawjāt* (On Polygamy), *Fil-ḥijāb* (On the Veil), *Fī hadd al-sariqa* (On the Hadd Punishment for Theft), *Fil-khamr* (On Wine), *Fil-i’dām* (On the Death Penalty), and *Fīl-mithliyya al-jīn siyya* (On Homosexuality). The presence of Olfa Youssef and other new scholars on social media and their increasing interaction with various Tunisian and Arab audiences is a topic that needs to be studied in detail in order to have a better understanding of the popular reach of their perspectives. Such studies would also open new perspectives on the future of Islam as a lived reality within the Arab world in the coming decades.

In conclusion, I suggest that the debate on the role of Islam in post-Revolution Tunisia cannot be reduced to stereotypes about familiar actors engaged in familiar struggles about Islam and modernity. We are not witnessing obscurantist groups seeking to Islamize Tunisian society and politics while battling anti-religion enlightened elites who are vying to de-Islamize the world around them. What the Tunisian historical experience has created are complex cultural and intellectual fields in which Islamic norms are negotiated in sophisticated terms, thus opening the door for novel possibilities and potentially creative compromises that might have an impact far beyond the geographical borders of contemporary Tunisia.

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Islamic Perspectives in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

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