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Promoting constructive political participation of and with Salafi actors in North Africa

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Editor

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Workshop Report
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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ORTHODOX BELIEVER

Conforming to the established, accepted or traditional doctrines of a given ideology, faith or religion, often also implies adhesion to traditional, conservative views.

SALAFI

Salafism can be defined as a diverse school of Sunni Islam, which take as models and source of inspiration the Prophet, his companions and early followers (“salaf as-salih”). Salafis are inspired by a shared normative religious discourse and behavior. Various Salafi schools and currents differ among other things in how they view the relation between the governor and the governed as well as political participation. In the past decades, this diversity has increased and a Salafi current is emerging between the poles of political abstentionism and violent opposition. This third trend believes that corrupt dictatorship must be challenged by political means and non-violent resistance. New political parties and movements linked to this Salafi current have been founded recently and are engaging in political change through political participation, particularly in the electoral processes and public institutions.

EVANGELICAL

Given the complex history of the foundation of Protestantism, and along the Lutheran slogan “every man is his own priest”, there is no single definition of evangelicalism. Most evangelicals would prefer to define themselves by their core convictions: God, the Scripture, following the teachings of Jesus Christ, the salvation brought by faith, and the love for God and for the neighbour lived as daily action. Evangelicals are present in many churches and denominations, with a shared focus on the sovereignty, mystery, and majesty of God; acknowledging differences without engaging needlessly in theological and/or political debates. During the workshop, a distinction has been made between capital ‘E’ evangelicals – political, strident, and unforgiving – and lower case ‘e’ evangelicals – winsome, irenic, and forgiving. The latter can be seen as a silent majority despite the fact that most media attention is given to the ‘E’.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A workshop was held in Tunis on 10-13 September 2012, convening faith-based political groups and parties from North Africa and the Americas. It was facilitated by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva within the framework of its conflict transformation programme *North Africa and West Asia in Transformation (NAWAT)*. The event aimed at accompanying the integration of new political actors into the new political sphere, by facilitating exchange of experiences between them as well as identifying the challenges they face and the ways to deal with them. The discussions were organised around the following leading questions: Why to engage as orthodox believers in politics? How to engage in politics? What are the challenges to political participation by orthodox believers and how to address them? What are the responsibilities of the orthodox believers in terms of peace promotion?

WHY TO ENGAGE AS ORTHODOX BELIEVERS IN POLITICS

Participants agree that political action certainly represents one type of work of goodness when it is rooted in values and considered as an act of serving the creatures of God that brings closer to Him. Faith can go along with politics, and believers can embrace the choice to participate in a political system that may disappoint with the aim to lift it to another standard.

Political parties are but one of many ways to influence the political sphere, and different contexts call for various forms of political participation. The main purpose of entering politics is not necessarily to make the State religious, but to create a space for believers to participate in mainstream politics without compromise, and to make sure that their values are enshrined in the government's principles.

HOW TO ENGAGE IN POLITICS: EXPERIENCES SO FAR

After the revolution, Egyptian Salafis embraced the opportunity to participate to the Nation's development, with the objective of establishing a State of Law. The trust and confidence from the street allowed them to fare well in the elections. In Libya, Salafis pursued the role gained during the revolution by engaging to develop the country and to reform society. They first integrated politics as individuals before thinking of setting up political parties. The 'Arab Spring' in Tunisia saw thousands of freed political prisoners and exiled returning to public life. The consequence of this long isolation is a slow progress in integrating politics. In Morocco, freedoms have improved but the system changed little, and even government faith-based actors face blockages. As time may not be ripe to formally engage in politics, the current focus in Morocco remains on human rights, education and predication. When they entered politics, Evangelicals overcame their lack of experience by learning how to deal with the political system: expressing things in a way that could be understood by all and forming coalitions with like-minded people.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Participants discussed how faith-based groups can practice politics without losing their identity and compromising their values. Finding ways to be better understood and to articulate the inclusive values of the recent political changes with their political programs requires not only values but also a good knowledge of the appropriate ways and means, the required rules and the adapted language.

When political decisions contradict religious values, participants recommend pursuing the efforts to advance values and serve the community, avoiding anger in their dialogues and respecting the other even in disagreement. Influence can also be advanced with various means such as education, awareness raising, legal and political battles, and preventive work.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC CHALLENGES

Islamic parties need to invest today for building institutions and leadership to go from discourse to real development. This includes training human resources in political, social, economic and administrative skills. It also calls for making good use of existing resources, be it scholars in Islamic science for the appropriation of modern governance according to religious principles (including citizenship, democracy or individual freedoms), or other experts to establish programmes and policies.

Among the political priorities figure the stability and security file, the fight against corruption and building social consensus. To advance economic growth and social development, strong policies must ensure welfare and invest in social, education and health projects, that all require proximity and social work.

DEALING WITH THE "CLOSE OTHER"

Alliances and coalitions were highlighted by the Salafi participants as a condition to influence the political process. This means joining efforts with other faith-based political parties, but also striving to convince other Salafi groups to support the political process. Agreement can often be based on shared concerns such as freedom, citizenship, democracy and economic growth.

One of the consequences of integrating the political sphere is the move from opposition to responsibility, which requires realistic solutions and difficult decisions. One of these is the responsibility to engage with the more extreme that call to violence in the name of religion, with the aim to bring them closer to a central posture. Another one is the responsibility to find the proper language and arguments to face internal accusations of compromising that may arise from the party's constituency and religious authorities.

Various examples were discussed, such as efforts in Egypt to defuse the risks of violent groups and preserve national security, dialog and awareness raising in Libya on Islamic principles in cases of conflict and war, engaging with isolated extremist youth groups in Tunisia, engaging in dialog with prisoners in Morocco to re-interpret religious concepts and condemn violence. As the wrongdoings of such extreme groups impact on all society and particularly on Salafis, responsibility must be taken to mobilize constructive dialog and help correct misinterpretations.

DEALING WITH THE "MORE DISTANT OTHER"

Entering the democratic process implies dealing with others who have different world views. When radical secular groups defame Islamists and attempt to isolate Islam from politics, the best reaction, according to the participants, is to avoid the confrontation and establish venues for exchange and trust building. The key to managing disagreements and disputes is the greater common good: not ignoring difference, but placing it on the right scale of priority. For instance, when the agreement on fundamental freedoms breaks around the limits of these freedoms, considering the higher interest as a priority helps to find solutions without making unacceptable compromises.

Discussing the place of minorities and of women in society, all Salafi participants insisted on the fact that the Islamic tradition guarantees rights for religious minorities and defends women's education and role in society. It was noted that wrong perceptions about how Salafis deal with women and with Christians create fear and lead to media-exacerbated tensions, despite good coexistence on the ground. Very often, face-to face discussions and clarifications defuse the conflict. Citizenship is a concept that is valued by Islamic groups and that has been explored since the political integration.

Participants regretted some Western attitudes vis-à-vis Salafis and Muslims in general such as Western double standards, the non differentiation of Salafi groups, misperceptions on the women's rights and systematic unfair accusations of terrorism. They expressed feelings of resentment related to what they see as recurrent aggressions against the Muslim community, notably the wound of the war on Iraq. It was agreed that the relationship with the West must be addressed constructively, by establishing direct channels of communication. Building trust by being frank and truthful and dealing in equal footing are conditions to achieve mutual understanding.

All participants condemned the attacks that led to the death of US diplomatic staff in Libya and called for ways to prevent such violent clashes, while regretting the insulting defamation of Islam and harmful provocations that build up popular anger. Islamic resources instruct the believer to never start with evil, and call for non-violence even in dealing with those who show disrespect. Faith-based parties must engage with their communities to raise this awareness.

The profound state of mutual stereotypes was regretted by all participants, who agreed that such venues for conversations were necessary, to have honest discussions, name differences, and find a common ground for the common good.

CHALLENGES OF POLITICAL LIFE AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM

Salafis groups are confronted to the challenge of stereotypical perceptions, stigmatization and calumny. This includes portraying them as extremists or terrorists, presenting them as being against freedom.

Salafi parties believe that they can address this challenge by improving communication skills, media competency and by adjusting the terminology to promote positive values rather than defensive criticism. They should also implement a systematic and concerted position in order to distance the parties clearly from wrong deeds and violent attacks, including publicly expressing solidarity with threatened groups. Moreover, strong field presence and social legitimacy must be mobilized to engage in actions that prove the parties' commitment to their declared positions, providing practical examples of efforts against violence and showing visible results. These measures of self-reliance will convince more than words and open up channels with media and other stakeholders.

RESPONSIBILITIES IN TERMS OF PEACE PROMOTION

Despite the recent opportunities in the region, challenges in promoting peace remain, calling for conflict prevention and de-escalation of tensions within and among countries. For instance, internal disagreements and conflicts can be very intense between secular and Islamic views. The struggle is ongoing to keep the relationship constructive, and to maintain dignity for all. The security and stability situation is also an issue, along with the persistence of injustice and

oppression in various countries. These examples illustrate the regional dimension and cross-border responsibilities in promoting peace and security.

EVALUATION AND PRACTICAL CONTINUATION

All participants expressed appreciation of the workshop, a unique first occasion for Salafi parties' representatives from the region to meet, along with Swiss facilitators and participants from the Americas. This meeting had a symbolic weight and allowed to establish the necessary context of trust that allows engaging without compromise. Participants expressed their wish to continue both the intra-Salafi discussions and the exchange with the Evangelicals and to deepen it further, emphasizing the need for cooperation on practical projects.

Sheikh Rashid Ghannoushi, president of the Nahdha party, who met with the participants to the workshop, during a special event, advised the audience to keep in mind the terrible experience of despotism and not fear freedom. He noted that freedom is not the enemy of Islam, and history has proven that Islam prospers with freedom. He added that the key to handling freedom is the capacity to manage conflict in a peaceful manner, without violence.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The substantial changes that have occurred since January 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East led to a wide opening of the political field and new political parties and movements, among which new actors – faith-based political parties and movements, including Salafis. While the political integration of the latter actors raises several specific questions and reveals various challenges – due to their religious reference –, this integration, if successful, can contribute to smooth and peaceful transition and an appeased political climate in the region.

In the framework of the action/research programme “North Africa and West Asia in Transformation” (NAWAT), which aims at reinforcing mechanisms for transforming violent or potentially violent political conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva organized a workshop in Tunis on 10-13 September 2012 on the theme of ‘Promoting constructive political participation of and with Salafi actors in North Africa’.

The workshop followed a meeting held in Tunis in June 2012, at the margin of the Nyon Process session, which had gathered the leaders of Egyptian and Tunisian Salafi parties. During the June meeting different issues came out of the exchange, notably the need to accompany the political integration of Salafi parties and to establish a transversal exchange between them, extended to other countries of the region, as well as the importance of differentiating between Salafis since they are not a one unified school of thought but rather a large spectrum with a diversity in terms of attitudes and behaviours.

The workshop convened Salafi political parties and leaders from four countries of the region: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. It aimed at accompanying the integration of Salafi actors into the new political sphere, by facilitating exchange of experiences as well as identifying the challenges that are crucial for successful integration and seeking the appropriate measures to deal with them. The second part of the meeting was dedicated to an exchange with Evangelical representatives from the Americas who have gone through similar challenges upon entering politics.

This report presents an analytical summary of the discussions that were held under Chatham House Rule, so presentations and points are not attributed to individual speakers but summarized to give an overall sense of the discussions and debates. The report is structured around the following leading questions:

- Why to engage as orthodox¹ believers in politics?
- How to engage in politics?
- What are the challenges to political participation by orthodox believers and how to address them?
- What are the responsibilities of the orthodox believers in terms of peace promotion?

2. WHY TO ENGAGE AS ORTHODOX BELIEVERS IN POLITICS?

The motivation of the political action was discussed thoroughly in an attempt to determine if the political engagement of Salafis and Evangelicals is religiously

¹ The word “orthodox” is used in this context since it is suitable to both Salafis and Evangelicals.

motivated or stimulated by pragmatic considerations.

Muslim participants agreed that even though politics can be a 'muddy field' if deprived from values and assimilated to protecting privileges and making concessions, it certainly represents one type of work of goodness that brings closer to God when it is rooted in values. In fact politics is about serving the creatures of God; in that sense, it is an act of obedience to God when the intention is good.

In the Islamic tradition, the work of goodness is vast and does not cover exclusively the humanitarian action, but encompasses all aspects of life, including the protection and promotion of human dignity and human rights, conflict transformation and peace promotion; and if the politician considers him/herself a servant of the community, then he/she is performing a work of goodness.

It was stated by a Muslim participant that "politics has always been very much a part of Islam, even though we are re-discovering this fact only now that we have recovered political freedom."

The Evangelicals stated that governance and democracy are best exercised as an act of service to humankind in general and God specifically. The exercise of social, political power (government) should maintain a sense of ultimate accountability beyond its people to the sovereign God of the Universe who alone holds justice, forgiveness, order and judgment in His supreme vision. The government's role is to preserve and protect the right to practice religion and allow a public space for people of different beliefs to live as full citizens with dignity and respect. Serving in such a government may also provide a believer with a degree of practical submission to God. In that sense, one participant described his political objective

as "creating a space where Evangelicals can participate in mainstream politics without being theologically moderate and without compromise".

Faith can go along with politics, and believers "have the choice of participating in a system that disappoints in order to lift it to another standard, or to stay outside of it." As stated by one Evangelical participant, "my life must be a light, and I engage my integrity to show an example even in dark areas that I deeply disagree with".

Evangelical participants agreed that the main purpose of entering politics is not necessarily to make the State religious, but rather to make sure that Evangelical values can be enshrined in the government's principles. Aside from formal political roles, Evangelicals in the US have their own institutions, schools and lobby organizations which all contribute to influence politics in the direction of their values and faith.

3. HOW TO ENGAGE IN POLITICS? EXPERIENCES SO FAR

3.1. SALAFI EXPERIENCES WITH POLITICS

EGYPT

Prior to the revolution the Egyptian Salafis did not represent a unified force. They were mainly engaged in social and charity work. Their attitudes towards participating in the revolution were divergent, explained an Egyptian participant. After the revolution, Salafis started to think about political participation and saw that there was great opportunity to advance their mission and to establish a State of Law (*Dawlat al-Haq*) or a State governed by justice, dignity and freedom. Their objective was to participate to the Nation's development. They first

considered waiting to acquire more experience before joining the scene, but they finally decided to enter politics with what they had. They took training sessions in Egypt and abroad, benefitting from the support of volunteer university scholars. They also profited from the trust and confidence granted by the street, which was confirmed by the votes.

LIBYA

While Islamists had no role under Gaddafi, they gained an important role from the beginning of the revolution. Salafis practice politics on the basis of their religious beliefs and wish to reform society, in all transparency and honesty, a Libyan participant said. They try to develop the country at the economic, the social and the cultural levels and they do not wish to create any conflict, contrary to the attempts by some of their opponents to portray them as being “against freedom and modernity”.

Contrary to the Egyptian case, the participation of Salafis in Libya has been achieved mainly by individuals and not through Salafi political parties. Moreover, the very short period before the elections did not allow for Salafi parties to prepare conveniently, leading to their under-representation in the General National Congress. Today, many Salafi associations focus on social and health issues, with the support of influential personalities. They also follow the constitution drafting process, promoting the exclusive reference to *shari'a* (Islamic law). Due to time constraints, the presentation of political activities in Libya remained general, and specific differences between Salafi parties in Ijtihad on political and intellectual views were not thoroughly discussed.

TUNISIA

The ‘Arab Spring’ brought enormous change in Tunisia, with thousands of freed political prisoners returning to public life, as highlighted by a Tunisian participant. Under Ben Ali, Islamic groups were not even allowed to participate in social work and most dissidents were isolated from society and condemned to jail or exile. Today, the progress of Salafis in integrating the political sphere is still slow. It was noted that all Islamic movements faced difficulties in the country, not only Salafis. It was stated that the clear and explicit discourse of Salafis highlights their sincerity in dealing with politics.

MOROCCO

A Moroccan participant stated that the improvement in freedoms after the ‘Arab Spring’ was not accompanied by a change in the system nor in the attitude and behaviour of those who govern, and that the context is still very difficult. Although faith-based political actors are now politically represented, even the *Parti de la Justice et du Développement* (PJD) who formed a government faces blockages from the real decision makers. Some Sheikhs were freed recently but other innocents are still imprisoned. Salafi activists, who formerly did not deal with politics and did not even vote, are currently focusing on *da'awa* (predication) and education, defending their human rights issues and improving their discourse. Some Salafis have supported and even integrated the PJD while others still reject the idea of participation.

Time is not ripe to set up a Salafi party as was done in Egypt, it was said, since the Moroccan context is so different from Egypt where the *da'awa* was very strong even under Mubarak. The move towards official political

engagement and creating a political party has not yet been made, given mainly the conditions of political freedom. The focus must be put on common values that can allow spreading peace, welfare and security, in the “hope to purify politics and clean it from personal interests and hypocrisy”.

3.2. EVANGELICAL EXPERIENCES WITH POLITICS

Initially, Evangelicals had very little experience in dealing with the political system. “So we trained people, explained an Evangelical participant, so that they could be candidates, we learned to express things in a way that could be understood. We had to work within our groups to decide a united front so that we could not be accused internally of compromising in our discourse. We worked in unified way with others groups, formed coalitions with like-minded people – including some that were Catholics –, and found that we could be allied with them on certain issues”.

Talking about the political experience and participation of Muslims in the USA, the example was given of how American Muslims have learned to participate in the political system and were accepted. Today, two of the 435 Congress members are Muslims; they were elected after 9-11 and represent districts that are predominantly non-Muslim.

4. WHAT ARE CHALLENGES TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY ORTHODOX BELIEVERS AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM?

4.1. RELIGION AND POLITICS

The question here is how faith-based groups practice politics without losing their identity and compromising their values, in a context where there also are various actors, including

non-believers: how to be understood by these actors and the general public? What to do when some of the political decisions to be taken clash with values?

4.1.1. FROM PREDICATION TO POLITICS

One of the main challenges that Salafi parties face upon integrating the political sphere is that of establishing ways to be better understood, to articulate the inclusive values of the recent political changes with their political programs, and to put these values in practice.

The importance to translate religious values into a political language understandable by all was underlined by all participants.

It was pointed out that if the political action requires values, it also needs a good knowledge of the appropriate ways and means, the required rules and the adapted language. Otherwise the expected results will not be reached.

In the absence of a common language understood by all, the doors are wide open to misunderstanding and even conflict between partners. This requirement is known in the Islamic tradition. It is related that Imam Ali, the fourth Caliph, said: “speak to people the language they know and are used to, and leave what they do not understand.” Ibn Messaoud, a companion of the Prophet, said: “If you deliver to people a speech that is not accessible for them, it will certainly induce *fitna* (source of discord and conflict) for some of them”.

According to a Salafi participant, “if you talk in a sophisticated way, you will not be heard. You have to develop a discourse that is political in essence, and that has been previously reviewed from the point of view of its religious content.”

As described by an Evangelical participant, “Translating one’s faith perspective into political realities entails taking the best of your faith and finding the structure that is most close to upholding and defending the related principles.”

A Moroccan participant said: “Showing the pureness of Islam, we strive to give it a political dimension while insisting on being faithful to ourselves. But we also need to focus on being accepted and understood by our governments, and then the understanding of the rest of the world will follow.”

It was agreed that it is necessary to refer to a language and to institutions that are legitimate in order to minimize rejection of your discourse: this is valid for translating Islamic thought into political discourse, but also when promoting Human Rights by referring to the related rights in Islamic tradition. Since many of the values and principles of Islam are universal and valid even for non Muslims, it was said, people should articulate these values to voters rather than the doctrine in order to highlight their universality.

4.1.2. WHEN FAITH AND POLITICS CLASH

The question on contradiction between religious values and political decisions was raised. What strategies can be used in cases when political parties with religious reference cannot succeed to influence political decisions and processes?

The Muslim participants recognised that Islamic movements and politicians may encounter such a contradiction when engaging with institutions and policies that do not correspond to their values. The

solutions are either to resign and give up, or to carry on and try to serve the community under the best possible conditions.

For Evangelical participants, a priority is to educate believers to put God first and not to have anger in their dialogues, whatever the party or political opinion they choose. In a way, stated an Evangelical participant, governments are the definition of hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another. Politicians have to seek power to influence, and they will lie and cheat to do so. People of faith have to work with this state of things, “and make sure that all those who enter the political arena continue to worship the altar of God and not the altar of politics”.

Even when the positive results are not rapidly visible, work must continue in other fields also, such as education. An example of this was given by an Evangelical participant on the lessons learned in their fight against abortion, which is allowed by law: “We don’t always win, but our response is to continue to be involved”, he said. Not by radical action as some did, but with a sustained legal and political battle and increased preventive work to improve the situation of women and finding ways that allow them to keep their babies. “What happens when you lose? People react in different manners: some choose to withdraw; others go to the extremes even of killing in the name of Christianity which is a great sin against God. For us, the principle that matters most in a conflict is respecting the other in the process of the disagreement”.

4.2. ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC CHALLENGES

The relatively new involvement of Salafis in politics reveals certain organizational and programmatic challenges, with specific needs

in terms of training, political program drafting etc.

As stated by a Libyan participant, “Islamic parties need to invest today in fulfilling the needs for training in order to help build institutions, and to build the capacity of the leadership to go from discourse to real development in society.” The following political priorities were listed: “First, the security file; second, the fight against corruption (financial and administrative); third, a social contract by consensus between the electors and the elected.”

Until recently, the capacity of Salafi groups and parties in terms of human resources centered on people specialized in *da'awa* much more than *political and administrative staff*. This is due to the past separation between groups that work in *da'awa* and those involved in politics and education. There are therefore urgent needs for training professional human resources in political, social, economic and administrative skills, so that parties can be organized in professional teams with trusted people that are specialized in various aspects.

The Egyptian experience was important in highlighting the potential of existing resources. First, many *shari'a* scholars are very clear-sighted and can help in the appropriation of modern governance issues according to religious principles. Second, an important number of Salafis are professionals in medicine, architecture, engineering, and their expertise can and should serve to establish the programmes and policies of the parties. “Salafi parties must use the available scientific assets to provide answers to issues such as citizenship, democracy or individual freedoms, within the limits of Islamic law,” emphasised one participant. On this basis, some Egyptian Salafi parties have managed to build

agreements (if not alliances) in the parliament on certain issues, which facilitates the coordination with others who share the same Islamic values.

A Tunisian participant suggested that Egyptian Salafis could take the lead in this exchange of expertise, so that other countries could learn from their experience in popular movements and in the Shura Council.

More generally, the necessity of *advancing economic and social development*, along with stability and security, was stressed. Building a legitimate local discourse involves expanding the religious discourse to include social and political concerns, and field experience in this sense must be gained through proximity and social work.

Political programmes must involve strong policies for growth and development, ensuring welfare for the citizens and satisfactory policies on social, education or health projects in approaches that comply with Islamic principles.

An Egyptian participant believes that “to those who accuse Salafi parties of opportunistic engagement, the answer must be to stay strong on our ideals of reform, and to provide successful inputs for change in the economic field. If the Islamic movements manage to improve the countries’ conditions and address challenges of corruption, then they will have strong support.”

4.3. DEALING WITH THE “CLOSE OTHER”

4.3.1. ALLIANCES BUILT ON VALUES

The discussion turned to the challenge that the new Salafi political parties face in building alliances and coalitions and ways to coordinate their efforts at the internal and external level. This implies also for political

parties to learn to manage the relationship with the religious authorities, the constituencies, including with its extremes and the danger that can represent their uncontrolled violent reactions.

For the Egyptian participant, Salafis need to think in terms of efficient participation. Unifying all the Salafis of one country in one single party is not realistic, and some form of competition is useful. Partnership with all national political forces is important, but also the coordination between the different Islamic movements in order to have the majority in the parliament and to influence political decisions. The fact that there are different Salafi parties in Egypt is a natural development, he explained. This diversity is useful for the Egyptian people so that one idea does not dominate the political arena.

Tunisian representatives of Salafi parties are attempting to unite efforts and build a front, striving also to convince other Salafis to support the political process. This would enable them to impact the parliament and the constitutional council to include *sharia* in the constitution, considering the first article is not sufficient. An alliance to approach with Nahdha can support efforts to build a brotherly relation with the party, based on shared references and suffering, despite some differences and a degree of coordination which is still modest.

A Libyan independent activist explained that the relationship between Islamic parties is rather good and they have managed to set up an alliance with Islamists in the General National Congress. The relationship between the secular and Islamic parties is based on agreements on a number of points, with regard to promoting freedom, citizenship, democracy and economic growth. "We want to promote the idea of citizenship that accepts change and diversity", he said.

Despite a big diversity in theological interpretation, Christian groups in Latin America succeeded to work together on common issues. "In order to have impact in society and influence effective change in society, we need some form of unified work", explained an Evangelical representative. Costa Rica's Catholic constitution bans divorce, abortion and homosexual marriage, but debates started to call for a change which would allow abortion and homosexual marriage. Evangelicals went to the street to protest, "encountering people with very different beliefs and discovering that they shared some values". Acknowledging the need to work together in order to have any political impact, they worked together on a shared position, disseminating it to secular media and government; and lobbying parliamentarians. Protests developed, their position got to be heard by the international community, and polls showed that a majority of Costa Ricans support traditional Christian views and reject the constitutional change. This succeeded in having the law suspended and a national dialogue was launched. "We managed to express our values in a language understood by all, and this allowed all to support our cause even without joining our religion." "Today, he continued, the Church and the people of faith are more involved politically, some have formed political parties and there are two Evangelicals in the Congress."

4.3.2. DEALING WITH THE EXTREMES

One of the consequences of integrating the political sphere, as illustrated by the Egyptian case, is to move from opposition to responsibility. "It was easy for us to oppose and attack, but now we are expected to find realistic solution and take difficult decisions," explained the Egyptian participant. This entails engaging with the more extreme that

are tempted to call to violence in the name of religion in order to bring them closer to *wasatiya* (central posture) and make sure they do not disrupt the parties' efforts. A Libyan participant said: "We need to correct the understanding of our religion within certain groups and make it understood widely".

IN EGYPT

After the revolution, some groups started using *takfir* (excommunication) to justify the killing of individuals. These groups have been accused of being involved in attacks with gas bombs that led to the death of Egyptian soldiers – although responsibilities have not been clearly established. Al Nur and other Salafi parties reacted immediately and convened a conference to calm things down and open a venue to talk to these groups who are waging for war. The Egyptian participant explained that: "We saw it as our responsibility to defuse these risks, to engage in an effort for reconciliation and to remind to all that national security and borders should not be attacked. [...] We are engaging with them preventively to modify their wrong interpretation of this form of *takfir* as being Islamic. We also reach out to isolated extremist groups to bring them closer and engage in the same kind of dialog."

IN LIBYA

A Libyan political activist described the experience of a group of people in prison who wrote a book called 'Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad' which "addresses the mistaken understanding of those who indulge in violent reactions, due to factors such as ignorance, young age or oppression. The book refers to Islamic scientist, advising against using force to defend oneself, calling to preserve the national interest before

revenge and denouncing violations such as those turned against children and youth. We raise awareness and teach about treaties and principles of respect in Islam that must be followed even in the case of war. We have regretted accidents which unfortunately occurred after the revolution such as the attacks against ICRC representatives or kidnapping, which go against the Islamic values and the Quran which states that they are under our protection in our country until they go home." All the same, it was specified that self-defence is a legitimate principle in Islam.

IN TUNISIA

A Tunisian participant from Islah party noted that today's opposition between extreme secular and extreme religious in Tunisia is in part explained by the history of the political opposition and of the Salafi movement in the country. Initial rejection of political dictatorship without active opposition was succeeded by a phase of training of youth in leading active confrontation to the regime. After the revolution, many engaged in politics and became vocal about their ideas, convening with all other Islamic trends. Despite this, some had started to rely more on the violent action, and Islah party is now working to engage with these youth, trying to help them integrate a political action.

Another Tunisian experience consisted in working with refugees living abroad with Western education and in a secular context. These Salafis have never engaged in violent work and even tried to re-enter Tunisia but did not manage to receive passports, it was said. An Asala representative noted that they were even invited by the French government to intervene on some crisis. These Salafi returnees face a challenge now in Tunisia by some people wanting to exclude them from political process. However, they wish to

improve the conditions in Tunisia and will continue to influence their constituencies.

IN MOROCCO

A Moroccan activist explained how people have been imprisoned in the context of the 'Global War on Terrorism', when the government was ready to accuse innocents whose only 'fault' was to agree on certain specific claims with the presumed perpetrators. Efforts from Salafi activists to correct this misinformation and condemn the events were unfortunately either distorted or not heard.

In jail, these political prisoners engaged to get their voice heard and correct the defamation, going on hunger strike, engaging in dialog with other prisoners, revising and re-interpreting some religious concepts. "From the prison, we expressed our abhorrence of this sort of violent action, even though we were criticized from within the prison by some who accused us of compromise and of repudiating our values. These efforts to correct the stereotyped image of Salafis were pursued after the 'Arab Spring', including efforts in communication with Islamic parties. This did help to correct some distortions, including building relations of respect with the future Minister of Justice who contributed to freeing us when he was appointed."

Other Moroccan participants also insisted that Islam emphasizes the importance of security, which cannot be guaranteed without social and economic stability. "Salafis in Morocco have been very vocal on the need to protect foreigners and people from other religions, and had a big role in fighting terrorism, systematically condemning the horror of violent events, despite the fact that the media continues to distort our voices." The danger of falsely accusing Salafis and

jailing innocent people can unfortunately lead some to hate society instead of addressing extremist views with understanding and to bring them to *wasatiya*.

These efforts in dealing with the extremes require mobilizing a concerted position on certain issues, starting with the agreement to work on the principles of dialog and persuasion. "Some argue that it is not necessary to discuss with the extremes, seeing that they carry the seeds of their own destruction and can be left aside. But we wish them to come back to *wasatiya* and we insist on the need to talk with them, as our prophet recommends. Even if we do not succeed in persuading them, we have at least broken down the obstacles to dialog, and reminded them of other ways of thinking. Through constructive dialog, we help them to revise their mistaken understanding that extremism is based on Islam. In any case, their errors will impact on us and be laid on our shoulders, so we must take this responsibility."

It was reminded that dialog is currently maintained with some extremist groups that are still in prison, despite the logistical challenge of reaching them. The minister of Justice is also setting up a project to reach out to them.

4.3.3. DEALING WITH ONE'S CONSTITUENCY AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

One of the challenges that face the Salafi leaders of political parties is to find the proper language and the convincing arguments to face internal accusations, which may arise from the party's constituency and religious authorities, of compromising with the values and deviating from the righteous path. This can be tackled by a continuous exchange with the religious authorities and a proper policy

of information of the members and sympathisers of the party. Political leaders must be proactive and avoid letting the party's constituency and religious authorities be informed about important political decisions by a third party, such as the media.

4.4. DEALING WITH THE "MORE DISTANT OTHER"

4.4.1. MANAGING DISPUTES AND DEALING WITH DISAGREEMENTS

An Evangelical participant explained that entering the democratic process implies dealing with others who do not agree with you on various issues, and learning to manage the disagreement.

Most of the Salafi exchange on this matter focused on the relationship with Secular groups. They regret that despite their good intentions, they have encountered so far a bitter welcome by secular forces, which have accused them of all things evil. However, they believe that the relationship with what can be considered as '*radical seculars*' should be that of avoiding confrontation and establishing venues for exchange and trust building.

It was also underlined that the principle of the greater common good must be a key in managing disagreements and disputes. Difference must not be ignored, but they must be put at the right level of priority. The principles of *sharia* protect the interests of all people, considering the higher interest to be a priority over the lower one. Hence, the proper way to deal with the 'others' is that of finding agreements based on common interests: finding solutions without making unacceptable compromises.

The Egyptian participant noted that while Salafi and secular parties can agree on certain issues such as the fundamental freedoms, they will disagree on the limits of these

freedoms. In Egypt, efforts were made for the sake of the Nation's development and the collaboration with secular parties has progressed. Engaging in continuous connection and cooperation with all parties, including seculars, has allowed overcoming some gaps in the transition period.

Several Libyan participants described their relation to secular parties as rather good, because the latter are relatively conservative and religious. To the surprise of participants of other countries, it was noted that the term 'secular' could be misleading in the Libyan context, since no party in the country would disagree with anything rooted in Islam. Another Libyan participant estimated that secular and Islamic trends agree on 90% of the issues. Despite this rather conciliatory context, the cooperation with the seculars cannot always lead to an agreement, for instance on certain points of freedom which *sharia* defines with clear limits. The experience of the first elections in Libya showed that secular parties are divided between moderates and extremists, and that some of the 'fundamentalist secular parties' aspire to isolate the Islamists from politics. In any case, direct discussions should be held without confrontation and dialog remains the best way to discuss and clarify whatever points are unclear.

"We need to learn to deal with those who have different opinions as us. Coordination, alliances or some form of integration is a condition to be able to have an impact. To make sure we do not compromise on our values, we refer to religious scientific authorities to establish appropriate Islam interpretations," he said.

Comparing to Egypt and Libya, the relationship with seculars in Morocco seems to be more difficult, and defamation against Salafis is much stronger: "We face an internal

polarization, where people refuse to even hear *shari'a* being mentioned, because they have integrated the media's defamation of the concept", he said. Despite this, Salafis try to avoid confrontation and call for dialog with the seculars because "they are acting in good faith." This attitude brought positive results since Salafis and seculars participated in demonstrations together in a good spirit and some seculars even got involved in the efforts to free Salafi political prisoners.

In Tunisia also, there is a conflict between the religious project and the non religious project, explained a Tunisian participant. "Seculars in Tunisia seem to have the objective to eliminate all reference to Islam", the secular project rejecting strongly, according to this participant, anything related to Islam.

4.4.2. DIVERSITY

This part of the discussion addressed the issue of minorities (ethnic, linguistic, religious or ideological, etc.) and women in North Africa and raised the question of their place in society and the attitude and behaviour of the majority towards them. All the participants agreed on the need to respect and protect the rights of religious minorities.

The Salafi participants also agreed that Islam promotes women's contribution in building societies. Quoting a book he wrote on the role of women, a Moroccan participant explained how Islam defends women's education. They highlighted the need to challenge the wrong perceptions concerning the place of women in Muslim societies, and the importance of cooperation with the Evangelical friends that could help to find ways to make this understood abroad. Salafis and Evangelicals participants expressed shared respect vis-à-vis the role of women in the family as a

mother, and the need to prevent women from being used and abused.

In Egypt, the constitution sets the main points regarding minorities such as Copts, but some priests were worried that the reference to *shari'a* in Article Two meant that it could be applied to Copts. "Meetings allowed clarifying things and ensuring legal support so that even atheist and pagans could be safe. It was necessary to have face to face discussions and not to deal with such sensitive issues through the media". Egyptian Salafis have discussed about what citizenship means under an Islamic government, and have engaged to protect churches and prevent *fitna*. Despite the facts on the ground that prove good coexistence, it was deplored that the media suggested the contrary.

In Libya the 'minorities' issue is still questioned since it is associated solely to religious minorities. One Libyan participant argued that "there are no minorities: there is only one religion and everybody is a partner in the country".

A Tunisian participant concurred that protecting guaranteed rights for religious minorities is established in Islam, and that this is the case in Tunisia. But he specified that this does not apply to "wrong minorities that offend the Islamic nature of our societies such as homosexuals, prostitutes or supporters of Satan." It was noted that the situation of women in Tunisia is rather good as they occupy the majority of jobs.

As noted by a Moroccan scholar, there are good conditions and tolerance towards religious minorities in his country. "Our position is clear: in a peace situation, God does not mean for us to attack those who have not attacked us. Even in cases of war, God directs us not to be the first to attack", he added.

4.4.3. DEALING WITH THE WEST

In the exchange dedicated to Salafis-West relations, many participants regretted a number of Western attitudes and behaviours vis-à-vis the Salafi current and Muslims in general, such as the “Western double standards”, the “biased misperceptions on the women’s rights in Muslim world”, the “systematic unfair accusations of terrorism”, and “the recurrent aggressions against the *ummah* (Muslim community), notably in Iraq”. Concerning the latter issue, many of the North African participants expressed strong feelings of resentment related to the wound of the war in Iraq which is still not healed, conveying the weight of the injustice and the humiliation strongly felt by Arab countries.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXCHANGING WITH THE WEST

Most participants highlighted the fact that the relationship with the West was indeed a burning issue that required to be addressed constructively, and welcomed the contact with the Swiss facilitators as possible bridges to help overcome the vicious circle of attacks against Islam and violent reactions of anger. The profound state of mutual stereotypes was regretted by all participants, who agreed that such venues for conversations were necessary, to have honest discussions, name differences, and find a common ground for the common good.

The necessity to communicate directly with Western decision-makers and not through the media or other actors that may be tempted to distort the communication was recognised along with the need to establish direct channels of communication with all Western stakeholders, and to be present in

the media on a regular basis to communicate relentlessly on burning issues.

The issue of building trust between the West and Salafis was addressed. It was noted that a reasonable level of trust can be achieved “not by being pleasant but by being frank, sincere and truthful”, by deepening the mutual understanding and welcoming each other as friends, seeing in each other a person of faith and deconstructing mutual stereotypes. Trust and confidence come through empathy, which means “understanding better the other’s identity, struggles and belief,” added a participant.

The importance of building on good experience and successes was emphasized, which includes “reviewing the Western orientalist studies and the information reports on which Western policies are based, and acting to change biased policies against Islam.” The participants noted the fact that there is a wide common ground that could be the basis for a constructive exchange. Most international conventions do not disagree with Islam, as we all believe in freedom, dignity and living in a society of welfare, reminded a Libyan participant, but such exchange requires goodwill and “good intention that is essential and can be the factor to successful understanding and respect.”

Participants insisted that it was important to establish relationships with the West based on dealing in equal footing, sovereignty and respect, and that advice was only welcome if it is rooted in faith and not motivated by any geopolitical considerations.

According to Evangelical participants, faith asks for such kind of exchanges. One of them explained how he engaged for politically and theologically irreconcilable people to talk together. Quoting differences between Muslim and Christian beliefs, he called for

naming and respecting differences and commonalities in order to create trust. It was recalled that tensions and stereotypes between the West and the Arab region are so strong that “both our people can be tempted not to understand our exchange today. Because we are trying to honour God in complicated contexts, we also need to have discussions and analyze our own roles in the context of the difficult political positions of our respective countries.”

REACTIONS TO DEFAMATION OF ISLAM

On the third day of the workshop, news came that an anti-Islamic video produced in the USA was circulating broadly on the internet, and that amid protests throughout the Arab World, an armed attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi had resulted in the death of several people including the American Ambassador.

As stated by a Tunisian participant, this kind of provocations like this video, both at the international and the internal levels “are scandalous and could risk giving way to civil wars. Such pictures, extremely harmful and insulting to Muslims, build up the anger of young people in Tunisia, to the point that we are called by Sheikhs to help calming the youth down”.

Many participants expressed their condemnation of the attacks on the US consulate, and all agreed that ways should be found together to prevent the recurring patterns of such tragic events. Indeed, it is not the first time that “authors, filmmakers, cartoonists and others make deliberate efforts to provoke and defame Islam”, and that it becomes impossible to deescalate protests that turn into violent clashes. Despicable efforts to provoke unfortunately succeed in giving rise to violent reactions,

which is exactly what is expected by the provocateurs and should be avoided at all costs, also because it reinforces stereotypes on Muslims.

The example of the Prophet was invoked to show that understanding, patience and respect was always the best response. In cases where someone appears to intend to harm Muslims, it is recommended to “never start with evil: if the insulting person indeed meant evil, he will receive the evil back against himself. If he meant well, he will receive good in return”.

All Salafi participants agreed that Islamic resources were very useful in always calling for non violence. This means that it is important to work towards one’s own community to help them resist and react in the best and most useful way, which is “answering to hateful speech by true speech on our prophet and what he means to Muslims.”

Many reiterated that public statements can be useful to clarify the positions and express the indignation, and that common declarations by various faith groups can also be a very good response, because a shared and vocal condemnation is the best way to remind people that these acts are not done in the name of our communities, or of our countries, and that we will not allow individuals that engage in despicable hate speech to cause widespread unrest.

5. WHAT ARE CHALLENGES OF POLITICAL LIFE AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM?

The participants affirmed that one of the main challenges the Salafis are confronted to is the wrong stereotypical perception, stigmatization and calumny, conveyed mainly by the media, and supported by their political

opponents or by regimes with the view to discredit them.

This may take the form of a distorted image of Islam and *sharia* in particular, presented as if it were limited solely to punishment aspects. It may also take the form of defamation portraying Salafists as extremists or even terrorists. Salafis are often associated with violent events without any evidence of their involvement. These events sometimes turned out to be the work of criminal groups or even intelligence services, along the same dynamics of Algeria in the 1990s.

The Salafi participants agreed that in order to face this challenge, they have to improve their communication skills, notably how to talk to the media and to reflect on the terminology they use. This requires building a crystal clear image and integrating the language of dialogue.

They also have to find an access to the media, particularly to TV channels, from which they are excluded. The experience of Salafi groups in Egypt shows that after being initially ignored, they met political successes and their results started to be visible in the field: this led to them being more and better represented in the media, and also invited to most Western embassies in Cairo. This example confirms that Salafi parties need to dare to start with some self-reliance in the first step.

A Libyan participant stressed the “need to develop the awareness of the people on the balanced position of the Salafis, to distance ourselves clearly from wrongs committed by people that we do not approve and to engage in actions that prove our commitment to our positions.” Another Libyan participant added: “We do not need to show a better image of ourselves, we simply must allow the reality to be covered.”

The Egyptian participant affirmed that “the official positions of our parties must be made very clear, in particular to correct rumours when Salafis are wrongly accused of violent attacks. It is also important to express our solidarity publicly, as happened in Egypt when Al Nur party officials intervened officially to defend Christians. We must make sure that practical examples of our efforts against violence are covered by the media”. He added: “We need to react to all events in national and international affairs, with well-thought public reactions and comments in appropriate terms.”

The Egyptian experience showed that strong field presence and social legitimacy can decrease the impact of biased media and correct fears that assimilate Salafis with terrorists.

A Muslim American participant made the parallel with a biased US perception of Islamic culture that wrongly suspects it of not rejecting terrorism, and of not respecting rights of women and religious minorities. He stated that even if these concerns may be unfair, it is important to correct them by documented communication.

The Evangelical participants agreed that it was important to learn from past mistakes, and develop a discourse which is more based on values and less on being combative. At one point indeed, Evangelicals had become so concerned about conservative values that they were known for all that they were against, discredited as being anti-gays, anti-abortion and anti-Islam. It was then necessary to bring clarifications about the term ‘fundamental’, correcting the prejudice associated to it and relating it to values of protecting family, marriage and life.

6. WHAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ORTHODOX BELIEVERS IN TERMS OF PEACE PROMOTION?

Despite the great opportunities brought by the recent political changes in the Arab region, there are still important challenges in promoting peace within and among countries. The participants gave a few examples of their engagement for preventing conflicts and de-escalating tensions.

As we have seen above, internal disagreements and conflicts can be very intense: “there is a major gap between those who have very secular views and those who promote the Muslim culture and religion. We are struggling to keep the relationship constructive and to maintain dignity and stability for the country”.

Two other interconnected issues are the security and stability situation and the persistence of injustice and oppression, for instance in Libya, where “remnants of loyalists forces are used by some tribes for the purpose of old conflicts. Salafis groups have engaged in trying to help the tribes reconciling; through accompaniment, awareness raising, conferences and booklets recalling principles of reconciliation. These efforts are important, although their success has sometimes been limited by various obstacles”. In Morocco, all political prisoners are still not freed, and while efforts of dialog with the State bring some good results, there is still “strong social unrest due to former political regime’s doing, with for instance the Casablanca explosions. Salafi groups in Morocco have issued messages to clearly denounce these events.” On the level of International affairs, the Egyptian President as well as Salafi parties have been very vocal on the situation in Syria, with “formal and informal support to the resistance, and calls

to International community to act for the end of the massacres”.

These are but a few examples that illustrate the regional dimension and cross-border responsibilities in promoting peace and security.

7. EVALUATION AND PRACTICAL CONTINUATION

For all participants, this workshop was appreciated and considered as the first instance of meeting representatives of Salafi political parties from various countries of the region, let alone a team of facilitators of the event from Switzerland, or even Evangelical representatives from the Americas, including US citizens. In this sense, the meeting had a symbolic weight and it was important for all participants to clearly state the principles of the discussion, as well as to establish without compromise the necessary context of trust that allows to actually engaging. In this sense, the workshop was extremely important as a nascent and necessary effort to connect individuals and groups that have previously held far apart. The fact that the meeting took place is in itself a great success. The participants expressed their wish to continue both the intra-Salafi and the exchange with the Evangelicals and to deepen it further. The need for cooperation on practical projects was emphasized.

INTRA-SALAFI LEVEL

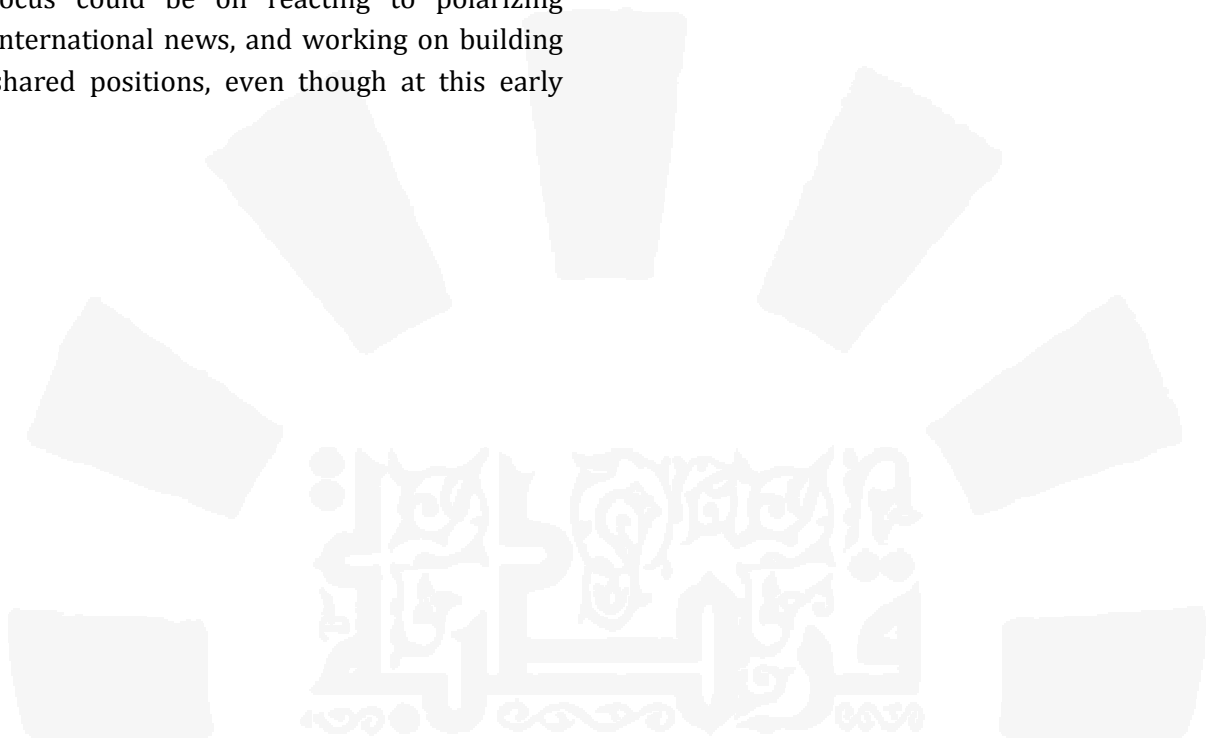
All Salafi participants agreed that communication and the exchange of experience were important priorities, and that mutual learning with other groups from the region is highly recommended. Another point of high priority that could be the subject of intra-Salafi cooperation is training. In fact, there is a need for practical training in

political life and providing awareness raising and empowerment to the constituencies.

SALAFI AND OTHER FAITH-BASED POLITICAL ACTORS

Evangelical participants noted that the discussions would indeed deserve to be continued, maybe focusing on Egypt since there has been great progress in terms of political integration there. An Evangelical participant suggested that “one possible focus could be on reacting to polarizing international news, and working on building shared positions, even though at this early

stage this may seem ambitious. Continuing our cooperation to try and build together certain communiqués that show common values could be useful to gain support to our cooperation from our respective constituencies. Further venues for exchange could be explored, possibly in Pakistan or even a visit to the US – although this would need to be carefully prepared together to avoid counter-effects and possible negative impact on our images, since the stereotypes are so strong”.



ANNEX: SHEIKH RASHID GHANNOUSHI ADDRESSES THE WORKSHOP

Invited to the workshop dinner Sheikh Rashid Ghannoushi, president of the Nahdha party, was warmly welcomed by the organisers and representatives of all participating organisations who appreciated his presence and thanked him for spending some of his time with them. The Tunisian participants assured him that they want to be constructive partners to Nahdha, while the other participants wished him success in the mission of his party.

Sheikh Rashid addressed the participants to the workshop, welcoming them in Tunisia and expressing his joy to meet with brothers from North African countries that have gone through an emancipation process. He noticed that this meeting could not have taken place in Tunis just a couple of years ago because most of the participants would have been thrown in jail and tortured. He expressed also his happiness to meet with the Evangelicals to widen the knowledge of the world. For him, this proves that the US is not monolithic and has the same presence of good and evil as everywhere else in the world.

Sheikh Rashid insisted then on the issue of freedom. God created freedom, but evil tries to bind it. That's why the fight for freedom against despots is the fight of the prophets and the good persons, the best example being Moses fighting Pharaoh.

For Sheikh Rashid Muslim, political parties must talk about freedom as a fundamental issue. This is in compliance with his view that freedom precedes the application of Islamic law. He advised the audience to remember the awful experience of despotism, to enjoy freedom and hold onto it. "Never let despotism return, and never be tempted by it", he said. And he added: "Don't fear freedom. It is not the enemy of Islam. Islam prospers with freedom. Remember, Islam suffered the most under despotism as was the case under the Soviet Union." He then concluded that "the key to handling freedom is the capacity to manage conflict in a peaceful manner, without violence."