



**New Political Parties and Movements with a Religious Reference:  
Promoting Constructive Political Participation beyond Party Politics and  
furthering peaceful coexistence**

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**Organiser: Cordoba Foundation of Geneva  
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## **1- Introduction / Background**

The political upheaval that swept the MENA region in 2011 has shaken the political, social, and economic state of affairs in the Arab region. This political watershed had had far-reaching geopolitical consequences as far as redrawing political participation demarcation lines in the public sphere and the realm of ideas. One of the immediate repercussions of the 2011 uprisings has been the entry of new religiously inspired actors into politics. This significant development marked a monumental highlight of the recent history of the Salafi School in that some Salafi-based movements decided to set up political parties and officially enter politics.<sup>1</sup> This shift in the Salafi movements' appreciation of political participation was not limited to movements that were until then focused on preaching and charity work (Scientific / literalist Salafism) but extended to attract formerly violent (Jihadi) groups to embrace party politics.<sup>2</sup> Examples of this process include the Egyptian Jamma Islamiya (Islamic Group) that set up the Al Binaa wa Tanmiya (Construction and Development) Party, and the Jihad Organisation, which set up the Salama and Al-Binaa (Peace and Construction) Party. In Libya, the Libyan Fighting Group (LFG) created the Al-Oumma Al-Wasat (Median Nation) Party, while a splinter group from it formed the Al-Watan (Homeland) Party. As the 2011 uprising Arab countries embarked on a strenuous uphill path of political transition the new faith-based political actors faced the challenges of passage from predication to politics.<sup>3</sup>

It was against this backdrop that two workshops (Tunis, Istanbul), organised within the scope of NAWAT programme, brought together Salafi parties and movements from six different countries, covering the region from Mauritania and Rabat to Sana'.<sup>4</sup> They also included

<sup>1</sup> Al-Fadhila Party was the first Salafi political party to be set up in Egypt on 24 March 2011, after the 25 January uprising. This move paved the way to other Salafi actors to set up political groups such as the Al Asalah Party, Al Nour Party, and Al Islah Party. In Tunisia, Al Islah Front whose origins go back to the Tunisian Islamic Front in 1980s, before it was banned, re-emerged from underground activity. In Libya, Al Ouma Al Wasat and Al Risal Party were set up. In Yemen, Al Ihssan Association decided to form a political party under the name of Al Rashad Party.

<sup>2</sup> In May 2012 a large conference convened renowned Salafi scholars and figures in order to ponder the theme of political participation. Sheikh Ihassan Al-Utaybi presented a paper titled "The Legitimacy of Forming Political Parties".

<sup>3</sup> Interest by academia and policy centers to explore and understand Salafism has been growing since 2011. The latest conferences on Salafism include a 2013 event by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung on Salafist Transformations: Significance, Implications and Prospects", <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/10294.pdf> ; and a 2014 Aljazeera Studies Centre conference on Salafism in the Arab World: Perceptions, Trends and Groups", <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/events/2014/01/201412194433987696.htm>

<sup>4</sup> The two workshops were implemented within the scope of NAWAT (North Africa and West Asia in Transformation) program of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The program focuses on reinforcing the capacity and mechanisms for transforming violent, or potentially violent, political conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East and/or involving Muslims in the West. Its objectives are to develop a collectively shared understanding of what is at stake, who are the relevant actors and how to address identified problems, to contribute to enhancing the capacity of



independent experts and academics from the Arab region as well as Evangelical and Protestant participants from the Costa Rica, the U.S and UK. The theory of change supporting that project is that if formerly excluded political groups such as Salafi actors (and in particular “participative” ones) are successfully integrated into the political spheres (democratic dialogue and commitment principles and values of inclusiveness, political participation and pluralism), then this will result in an appeased political climate and contribute to smooth political transition and co-existence in the region. The integration of these actors mitigates negative aspects and risks of political exclusion (including alienation, radicalization & non-adherence to the mentioned values and principles that represent important conflict transformation mechanisms).<sup>5</sup>

The efforts undertaken during the Tunis and Istanbul promotion of political participation workshops had largely yielded tangible outputs and positive outcomes. These included, for instance, the decision of a Moroccan religiously-inspired movement to merge with an existing small conservative political party and form Ennahdha wa Al-Fadhila (Renaissance and Virtue) Party. The leader of the Salafi movement has become secretary general of the Al-Fadhila Party. In Yemen, Al Silm wa Al-Binna (Peace and Construction) Party was created by Al-Ihassan Charity Association in early 2014. In Mauritania, participants who attended the Istanbul workshop representing a predication and charitable work decided to undertake steps toward forming a political party, tentatively named Al-Asala wa Mou’asara (Authenticity and Modernity) Party. These three cases reflected the exchanges during the workshops as far as entry in political life and its challenges, peace promotion, as well as polarisation and coalition building were concerned.

The 2013 political crisis in Egypt and the forced ousting of President Mohamed Morsi in early July 2013, however, introduced a significant challenge to the process of democratisation in the MENA region and political participation by new faith-based actors. The military intervention in Egypt came at a critical time in the fragile process of political transition in the region. On one hand, the question pertaining to the entry of Salafi actors into politics was not yet settled among the religious Salafi authorities and references. An intellectual justification for setting up political parties (traditionally considered by most literalist Salafis factors of schism and division of the Oumma nation) is yet to be produced. On the other hand, the military coup consolidated the position of some Salafi movements and scholars who while they are not against political participation they, nonetheless, do not encourage it. They rather prefer to remain apolitical and focus on predication and charity work. The aftermath of the July coup in Egypt and the tumultuous transition in Tunisia, and Libya stand, in their opinion, as further reasons for caution. This position is reflected in the wait-and see posture of some Salafi movement that had set up political party structures but stopped short of officially announcing the creation of the political party: Al-Asala wa Mou’asara (Authenticity and Modernity) Party in Mauritania is a perfect example of this attitude. By contrast, Al Silm Wa Al-Binaa Party in Yemen was set up six months after the July coup.

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relevant conflict transformation actors, to coordinate a network acting as a "mediation space" and to contribute to conflict transformation initiatives that address specific conflicts and enhance citizenship.

<sup>5</sup> Executives summaries of the Tunis and Istanbul workshops are available here: (Tunis 2012)

<http://cordoue.ch/publications/papers-a-reports/item/305-workshop-report-tunis-september-2012>; (Istanbul 2013)

<http://cordoue.ch/publications/papers-a-reports/item/306-workshop-report-istanbul-march-2013>.



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In the light of the above mentioned context, the civil war in Syria and its spill over effect into Iraq (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant /Sham: ISIL/ISIS), the new religiously-inspired political actors face testing times. There is persistent debate as to whether staying the course of political participation or defaulting back to their previous role of preaching and work of good. The choice is not a straightforward one given the fact that with the return to authoritarianism in Egypt and the discourse of the war on terror in Tunisia even the limited margin of non-political participation in the public space has been drastically restricted. Hundreds of mosques, the traditional theatres of prediction and charitable work of Islamic groups, have been either closed or placed under government control in Tunisia and Egypt. The return to authoritarianism in the latter is so aggressive that it did not spare even those who supported the July military intervention, as was the case with the Salafi Movement in Alexandria, the base and cradle of the Al Nour Party. The Egyptian regime's decision to declare the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) a terrorist organisation introduced more challenges to peace in the MENA and Gulf region given the transnational organisational structure of the Brotherhood movement.

The British government's political review of the Muslim Brotherhood activities in the UK and the aggressive anti-Brotherhood movement campaign led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia all present challenges to political participation by peaceful religiously oriented actors. Such a negative behaviour against peaceful religious actors is fuelling exclusion and providing "justification" for violence that would threaten not only peace in the Arab world but also complicate relations of the region with the West. A return to the pre-2011 state of affairs of political exclusion and radicalisation, which contributed the 2011 uprisings is being re-enacted in some countries. This project proposes, therefore, to consolidate the tangible results of the previous two workshops about the promotion of political participation of new faith-based actors in the Arab world by holding a third workshop with the following objectives.

## 2- Overall Goal & Strategy/Theory of Change, Expected general impact

The overall goal is to contribute to peaceful co-existence and smooth political transition in the 2011 uprising countries in particular and the Arab region in general. **The goal of this workshop** is to encourage and consolidate political participation of faith-based political actors. **The strategy** to achieve this is by creating a safe space for exchanging experiences of peaceful ways of political "survival" under authoritarian regimes or contexts where the margin of political participation is very limited. In other words, how to do politics without party politics; and how to remain active in the public space despite quasi-exclusion from political society and restrictions on the freedom of political organisation. The project aims to induce exchange of experiences and sharing lessons learned among participants. By convening participants in the previous workshops (Salafi political parties, Western Evangelical and Protestant participants), new participants, as well as non-political or quasi-apolitical movements that are active or even influential in the public sphere without direct involvement in party politics. **The theory of change** underlying this project is the informed assumption that political participation of Salafi actors could be consolidated by indicating through diverse Arab and Western practical experiences that politics does not limit to party politics and that it is possible to influence policy through other means than party mechanisms (such as parliaments). By exploring and exchanging experiences of movements from the Arab region



and the West it is *hoped* that new Salafi groups that embarked on political participation since 2011 would be consolidated in their choice and resist pressure to abandon political participation.

The target audience of this project is the leadership and policy-making rank (track 1.5) of Salafi political actors. In addition to participants of the previous sessions, new participants from Yemen, Sudan and Libya would be invited. Guest movements that would be invited to present their experiences at the workshop would include Al-Adl wa Al-Ihssan Association from Morocco, ElJahed Forum from Tunisia, Turkish Wakf group, and Fahad Al-Ahmad Charity from Kuwait. From the West, Evangelical and Protestant experiences from the US and the UK would be presented.

### **3- Objectives / Activities / Expected Results**

The concrete **objectives of the project** are:

1. To support exchange among participative Salafi parties and apolitical groups on their experiences of engagement in the public sphere through non-party politics mechanisms.
2. To expound different possibilities of political participation in context of limited freedom.
3. To consolidate commitment to political participation and foster exchange with the new Salafi parties formed since March 2013.
4. To maintain exchange between participative Salafis and the West on peace promotion issues.

The **expected results/outcomes** are:

1. The participative Salafi actors and parties will have exchanged and shared experiences and gathered lessons learned from other apolitical actors and experts on implementing organizational skills in order to develop a diversity of means to stay active in political spheres beyond political party.
2. A safe space for intra-Salafi political actors created in the two previous workshops will have been maintained and enlarged.
3. Salafi commitment to political participation will have been consolidated.
4. Dialogue between participative Salafi actors and the West on issues of peace promotion and violence prevention will have been supported.
5. The process of exchange of experience between Salafi parties in presence of the Cordoba Foundation that has been developing since the first workshop in Tunis 2012 will have been deepened;
6. Discussion on other projects involving participative Salafi (peace promotion in the MENA and Sahel) will have been maintained.