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The Interaction of Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere

Contributing to Alleviating Islamist-Secular tensions in North Africa by Promoting Peaceful co-existence among Political Actors with Different Worldviews

28 February – 4 March 2016

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Workshop Report: The Interaction of Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The two Istanbul 2016 workshops on "The Interaction of Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere", held in Istanbul on 28 February-4 March 2016, focused on an exchange of experiences and lessons first from experts and then from political actors in the region. The following report is structured around the main topics of discussion, in three parts, and concludes with a discussion of recommendations, conclusions and next steps, as well as ideas for the continuation of the dialogue.

These workshops were organised with two main objectives. One was to sensitise religiously-inspired political actors of the North Africa region to the different contribution of "secularity," as a common space for different value systems, in various historical/geographic contexts, and how it differs from "secularism," an ideological stance that opposes other value systems.[1] The second was to contribute to ensuring that religiously-inspired political actors in North Africa are not excluded from political participation, and that both secular actors and faith-based groups adopt an inclusive approach to actors of different world views.

Following an introduction to the background of the debate around Islam and politics in the public sphere, the workshop raised discussions around the separation between religious and worldly practices within the Islamic tradition, as have been highlighted by numerous scholars from diverse backgrounds. These discussions revolved around topics that often produce strong discourse between secular- and religiously-inspired actors, including democracy and *sharia*, freedom of expression and blasphemy, and the basis of citizenship. The Istanbul workshop 2016 also treated experiences of religion and politics in the public sphere in a number of Muslim-majority countries[2] represented at the workshop. Additionally, participants also discussed key experiences of dialogue between political actors with different worldviews, in the region.

There was a certain consensus among participants on what issues refer to "religion" and "life"; not understood as separate, and not just defined with the term "distinction," as offered by one Moroccan Islamist participant. In the dynamics of the discussion, it was clear that there is contention over the understanding of certain issues of "life" and being "not fully religious." To overcome this difficulty, participants discussed and found some consensus around useful distinctions on categories of rules and doctrines. Two were summarised for the sake of the "political discussion," but it was agreed that more categories could be mentioned.

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[1] Secularity can be defined as "the fruit of a negotiation on practical and concrete questions, linked to the concrete cohabitation of different communities, is arrived at in such a way that the concrete result is compatible with the values or rules of the religious matrix (or construction of reality) of each community that takes part in the negotiation. The product of these intercommunal negotiations is a secular space, the result of an approach, which is independent of one or the other religion, a religiously neutral approach." Refer to Bitter, Jean-Nicolas, Secularism in International Politics (Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, 2015), p. 5. Available at: http://www.cordoue.ch/publications/papers/item/391-secularism-in-international-politics

[2] Author's note: As discussed in the Istanbul workshop 2016, the 'labels' assigned to the region in question might be understood as a product of unnatural division and misinterpretation by outside observers; and a source of confusion for insiders. It was noted in the workshop that terms like Near East, Middle East, West Asia, Arab World and Islamic World emanate from colonial and neo-colonial demarcations, as well as a history of socio-cultural reductionism practiced by external powers.

The domain of "religious" (*deen*) rules, influenced by doctrine, can be called the domain of prescription, as these rules concern the orthopraxy (correct conduct) of religion. How one prays, etc., follows a category of doctrine that is prescriptive to a large extent. In the domain of the influence of religion on "life", however, rules function in a "preventive" way: they say what you should not do, but do not prescribe what should be done. A rule forbids certain actions, but this gives options for a space where non-forbidden actions are possible. In the discussion it was noted that religious rules in matters of "life" constitute a "framework", which provides orientation but also allows for creativity. This distinction was accepted by the participants. It also allows for an explanation of how matters of "life" - distinct from religion in the prescriptive and ritualistic sense - are nevertheless "within the realm of religion," and not separated from it. At the same time, matters of "life" fall within a realm of flexibility, adaptation to contexts, and so on. This life-space is a location where actions can be agreed on across different religious communities, while remaining faithful to each community. From a religious point of view, it is what can become a "common civic space". This can be understood as the equivalent of "secularity" in a manner which is acceptable from a cultural and religious standpoint.

In addition to a variety of insightful recommendations for nation-based actions, the workshop also led to a number of independent initiatives from participants. Most notably, one Moroccan activist has reported his intention to conduct a similar workshop in the Moroccan context. A Tunisian participant wrote an article entitled "Swiss efforts to support the coexistence of Islamist and secular Arabs," which appeared in *SwissInfo* on 17 March.[3] The article reflected on the importance of the topic of religion and politics in the public sphere, as well as recognising the unique approach of the Swiss government in improving relations between different communities. Furthermore, a more in-depth article, comprising of contributions from a diverse range of participants, and reflecting the major themes and debates on the issue of religion and politics in the public sphere that were broached in the Istanbul experts' workshop, will be produced and synthesised by a leading journalist and academic from the region. The aim of this publication is to promote a better understanding of the key arguments pertaining to this issue among a local audience.

The report focuses on the first phase of the project on the Interaction of Religion and Politics in the Public sphere. The aim for the second phase of this project is to deepen and build on discussions of the first two workshops, as well as explore, in more practical details, the feasibility of common work on the recommendations of the political actors' workshop.

[3] Jourchi, Slaheddine, "جهود سويسرية لدعم التعايش بين الإسلاميين والعلمانيين العرب", SwissInfo.ch, 17 March 2016. Available at: http://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/42020102/جهود-سويسرية-لدعم-التعايش-بين-الدين-والسياسة-في-العالم-العربي

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1. INTRODUCTION

The political upheaval that has swept the region since 2011 has shaken the political, social, and economic state of affairs in the Arab region, and had far-reaching geopolitical consequences; redrawing demarcation lines of political participation in the public sphere and in the realm of ideas. Recent developments in North Africa and West Asia have highlighted the importance of core political values including non-violence and inclusivity. The debate about secularity and the place/role of religion in the public sphere continues to dominate politics and social affairs in the region. The most recent Arab Opinion Index (Arab Index) found that on the question of separating religion from politics, attitudes have been consistent and balanced from 2011-2015. 43% agreed with separation in 2011, and 42% disagreed. In 2015, 52% agreed and 43% disagreed, with poll figures showing that moderate attitudes regarding this issue have grown in the last four years.[4]

Views in both the "secular" and the "Islamist" camps have been reinforced since 2011. Each sees the other as the reason for the failure and/or heavy price paid in political transition. Some Islamists blame secularists for counter-revolutions launched in conjunction with the "deep state", which they believe is the cause of coups and civil wars in the region. They believe that secularists' ideological opposition undermined regional aspirations for change. On the other hand, some secularists think that Islamists' political engagement, and religious' involvement in public affairs, led the region to its current tumultuous situation. Proponents of this position believe that Islamists do not honour the rules of democratic participation and that, once in power, they side-lined the fundamentals of democratic consensus, as they refer to a different set of rules (*hakimiya/*sovereignty, *umma*/nation-state). They argue that this leads to polarisation and confrontation. They view this as the reason for proliferating violent groups that carried out attacks in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. It is therefore, in their opinion, in the best interests of society to separate religion from politics.

The Arab Index found that 70% of respondents agreed that democracy is better than other forms of government - despite its shortcomings,[5] and only 5% strongly disagreed with the compatibility of Islam and democracy.[6] In support of this, 49% of respondents identified a democratic political system as very appropriate, while only 14% identified Islamic Sharia as very appropriate.[7] This demonstrates a continued commitment to a representative political system, which includes both religious- and secular-inspired parties. To illustrate this, only 9% identified representative rule limited to Islamist political parties as very appropriate; and only 8% thought that representative rule limited to *non-religious* political parties was very appropriate.[8]

The Arab Index furthermore highlighted the general appreciation for participative electoral processes; on the question of approval for parties coming to power through free and fair elections, 62% said they

[4] 'The 2015 Arab Opinion Index,' Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, 2015, (hereafter 'Arab Index'), p. 23. Available at: http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/cb12264b-1eca-402b-926a-5d068ac60011

[5] Arab Index, p.11.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Arab Index, p.12.

[8] Arab Index, p.12.

would approve of Islamist political parties but 49% said they would disapprove of non-Islamist/secular parties. The percentage of approval for political parties' that respondents *did not agree with* was higher still (55%) than the percentage of those who did approve of non-Islamist/secular rule (43%).[9] This support is perhaps related to the apparently growing religious convictions of the Arab world, demonstrated in polls along the theme of religion and religiosity in the public sphere. According to the 2015 responses, a majority of the Arab public is 'religious to some extent' (63%), whereas 24% describe themselves as 'very religious,' and only 9% as 'not religious.' [10] In comparison: in 2011, 66% saw themselves as 'religious to some extent,' and only 19% as 'very religious'.[11] Interestingly, all poll respondents linked their religiosity to their individual morality and practices, and do not view it as a commitment to political and social engagement too.[12]

Similarly, but on a smaller scale, in December 2015 the University of Maryland (UMD) published the results of a panel survey of around 3,000 Tunisians it conducted in 2013 and again in 2015. It showed that 73% of Tunisian respondents agreed with the statement that 'Tunisia is better if religion and politics are separated'.[13] On having an Islamic government, 71% thought it a bad thing - an 8% increase from 2013.[14] 65% thought it was not important to implement Sharia only in legislation, representing a 12% increase in this attitude from 2013.[15] Only 10% thought that the implementation of Sharia is the most important obligation for Tunisia, in 2015, decreasing from 18% in 2013.[16]

These figures do not sit comfortably with those from the Arab Index, and demonstrate that political and religious attitudes in the region are far from homogenous. The Tunisian example perhaps constitutes an exception in North Africa and West Asia, on the topic of identity as well. In 2013, 59% of respondents described themselves as Muslims above all, but only 53% in 2015. On the other hand, identification as Tunisian above all increased from 30% in 2013 to 38%.[17] Respondents have apparently, decreasingly viewed themselves as members of the Islamic *umma*, and more so of the Tunisian nation – that portion increased from 47% in 2013 to 51% in 2015.[18] It is also important to note that 80% of Tunisian respondents said that they *did not trust Salafis at all* – a major increase from the 55% in 2013.[19]

The UMD survey results shows that there is a trend towards less involvement of religion in the public sphere from 2013 to 2015. This period has been the most difficult phase in Tunisia's political transition, so far; characterised by tense polarisation, a series of political assassinations and unprecedented violent attacks claimed by faith-based armed groups. Observers believe that the

[9] Arab Index, p.13.

[10] Arab Index, p. 21.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Arab Index, p. 22.

[13] Mansoor Moaddel, "Tunisia, An Oasis of Peace and Tolerance: Findings from a Panel Survey." University of Maryland, 2015 (hereafter Tunisia Panel Survey), p. 7. Available at: mevs.org/files/tmp/Tunisia_Findings_2015.pdf

[14] Ibid.

[15] Tunisia Panel Survey, p. 7.

[16] Tunisia Panel Survey, p. 29.

[17] Tunisia Panel Survey, p. 9.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Tunisia Panel Survey, p. 20.

correlation between Islamist-secularist polarisation and the security, social and economic repercussions for Tunisians on the on hand, and the apparent change in attitude towards Islamists on the other, is only fair. However, others have disputed the results of the survey, particularly because of its funding from the USA AFRICOM.[20]

2. RELIGION & POLITICS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE NORTH AFRICA AND MIDDLE EAST

The ideological tension between secularists and Islamists is not new to North Africa, and has been a source of debate for many decades. In order to understand the current shape of this debate, two sessions of the experts' workshop focused on clarifying the context in which these differing ideologies developed, with the aim of demonstrating the source of divergent interpretations of systems of government in the region.

Similarly, this experts' workshop sought to clarify the origin of the debate in the Western context, specifically referring to French, Swiss, USA and USSR experiences of the question on religion and politics in the public sphere. The aim of these two sessions was to develop a broad understanding of how the debate on religion and politics in the public sphere has evolved in very different contexts and regions, and to better understand how these tensions are related to national specificities. Both topics were found to be of great importance in understanding the tensions that exist in North Africa – notably in Morocco and Tunisia – today. One Tunisian intellectual noted that, contrary to expectations, religion has not disappeared from the public sphere, but rather has consistently expanded and revived in the region. He reaffirmed that the burning question is: how can actors and observers transform this phenomenon into a factor that supports regional stability?

The discussion, between secularists and Islamists, of the origin of the debate on the role of religion and politics in the public sphere, demonstrated that the origins of this debate are in the political history and development of the region, as much as they originate in theological debate. For example, one Tunisian participant suggested the following historical framework in five phases:

1. Before the fall of the Islamic Caliphate: "the umma phase" of a unified Muslim nation.
2. The period before and after the fall of the Ottoman Empire: a period of religious expressions of resistance to colonisation, for example "militant Sufism" (such as movements led by Emir Abdelkader in Algeria, Omar Moukhtar in Libya, Abdelkarim el-Khatabi in Morocco, Muhammad Ahmad Mahdi in Sudan and so on).
3. With the expansion of colonialism: a period of growing nostalgia for the Caliphate. Nostalgia led to the formation of local parties and religious societies of thinkers (for example in Al Azhar in Cairo, and in Zeitouna in Tunis), with a vision of the wider Muslim community, or umma.
4. With national independence: post-independence regimes aimed to accomplish what colonialism failed to achieve; to dismantle the umma, in the name of establishing the nation state. These often promoted pre-Islamic identities such as Arabism, Pharaonic Egypt, Babylon, to name a few. The borders that were imposed by

[20] Al Magharibia Channel, دراسة أمريكية: 73% من التونسيين يفضلون العلمانية ! 06 January 2015. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uESJzFZtWE0

colonialism were adopted by the nation state. Therefore, according to this expert "colonialism failed in taking the region back to tribalism. It was the nation state that accomplished what colonialism failed in doing."

5. With the return of 'political Islam': nostalgia for the Islamic Caliphate became a political reality, and the practice of numerous Islamist political parties - both in opposition and in power.

The presentations in this session used a historical periodisation approach to the debate around religion and politics for example, reiterating the role of colonialism in the development of political systems in Arab world countries, and indicating the long-standing political, social and even ideological effect that this foreign occupation had on countries like Morocco and Tunisia. One Saudi expert drew a comparison of colonial and local forms of government in the Arab world, explaining that while the 'secularism' exported to the Arab world by colonial administrators excluded religion from the public space, so too did modern Pan-Arabist regimes exclude ethnic and religious groups in the name of Arab unity. Observers have noted that this social and political exclusion can be understood as a central factor in the return of Islamist parties and movements to the forefront of Middle Eastern and North African politics, following popular uprisings that protested against government monopolisation and mismanagement of the public sphere. As an example, one participant noted that, following the 2011 uprising in Tunisia, 1,600 mosques were built in just two years, demonstrating how the religious population re-established itself in the public sphere, after years of government suppression. The session also indicated that, as well as these historical factors, more recent historical developments have had a great deal of influence in the solidifications of political identity in the region, and the resurgence of political Islam. Specifically, the War on Terror discourse of the 21st century has been seen to have a huge effect on the development of current political trends – both for youth political actors as well as for more experienced generations.

Another key issue in the development of current tensions between political actors with a religious reference, and political actors with none, has also been the structural challenges of operating in corrupt and authoritarian regimes that have dominated regional politics. This has been the case in North Africa and further afield. These regimes' alternating espousal of religious and secular rhetoric has had a negative effect on relations between these political camps, as political identity has often been instrumentalised to undermine the ruling power's opposition. One Tunisian participant opined that: "there is no struggle between religion and politics [in the region] but rather between those who want to monopolise religion or politics." This idea was reiterated by various participants, in a number of different formulae, and is clearly a commonly-held belief. As an example, one Lebanese academic referenced the Kemalist state, which separated religion from politics in practice, but which nevertheless maintained control of Turkish religious institutions.

2.1. RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE WEST

This session aimed to demonstrate that the relationship between religion and politics in the public sphere in Western contexts is far from homogenous, to promote a more informed understanding of the meaning of 'secularity' in different cases. The session referred to Jean-Nicolas Bitter's publication

entitled *Secularism in International Politics* (2015),[21] and reviewed the different ways in which diverse structural, cultural and political factors have contributed to shaping applications of 'secularity' in a number of societies. This session equally reviewed the development of the Islamic religion with reference to numerous structural factors that eventually shaped it, notably in comparison to the Christian religion and its development within the context of the Roman Empire. One Western presenter demonstrated how Islam began as a 'secret' religion, but later transformed into the religion of a series of empires, and more recently a number of nation states.

This session demonstrated that the debate over religion and politics, and the place of the former in the public sphere, is neither new, nor confined to the Muslim world. The presenters of these two sessions, which focused on the history and development of this debate in the Middle East and North Africa, and the West, successfully highlighted the numerous factors that have contributed to this ideological tension. Notably, one participant noted that "without an understanding of the religious wars in Europe it is not possible to understand secularism as a practical solution to achieve tolerance."

3. AREAS OF VARYING CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

The discussions of this workshop demonstrated that the ideological confrontation between secularists and Islamists is not uniform, but based on different perspectives on a number of issues of governance, ethics and identity. These differences of opinion vary from one national context to another - and indeed from one individual to another. This workshop sought to select a number of contentious cross-regional issues to explore in this workshop including state identity and national structures, legislation, freedoms and civil political participation. These sessions were organised by theme and gave space for experts on the topic, from different nationalities and backgrounds, to share their perspectives. These sessions produced animated debate on these issues, and demonstrated that actors from a wide variety of ideological backgrounds can agree on the principle of an agreed common space, though they present their justifications in distinct ways. Notably, some topics remain more contentious than others, and therefore certain issues can be identified as more suitable starting-points for collaborative work between secularists and Islamists, than others.

3.1. RELIGION AND POLITICS: UNITY, DIFFERENTIATION, DISTINCTION, OR DISSOCIATION?

One session of the workshop focused on the nature of the relationship between what is religious and what is political. The debate around this topic clearly demonstrated that, in addition to the nature of the relationship between religion and politics in the public sphere, the terminology of what is 'religious' and what is 'civil' differs between cultures, ideologies, and languages. It was also noted that understanding of the meaning of 'religion' changes too; as well as perception of where religion ends and civil matters begin. Even within the *Qur'an*, noted one

[21] Bitter, Jean-Nicolas, Secularism in International Politics (Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, 2015). Available at: http://www.cordoue.ch/publications/papers/item/391-secularism-in-international-politics

expert, there can be different descriptions of religious and civil matters. The session demonstrated that this relationship between religion and politics is understood very differently in distinct cultural, social and political contexts – and can also be affected by many other factors.

A Moroccan expert opined that the development of mainstream thought on the relationship between religion and politics in the public sphere, in North Africa in the 20th century, was a response to the harsh version of secularism that was imposed on the region by the French colonial rule. He argued that this had a lasting effect on Muslim scholars in the early 20th, and even mid-20th, century and that subsequent scholarship has maintained the trend of merging divine and temporal, defining contemporary understandings of what is religious and what is civil. Notably, the ideological confrontation with secularism in the 20th century was not by political actors, but rather religious scholars from institutions like al Azhar in Cairo, Zeitouna in Tunis, al Qaraween in Fez, and numerous Sufi schools in the region.

This Moroccan scholar presented the long history of philosophical and theological debate around the relationship between concepts like *deen* (religion), *shar'a*, *shari'a* (Islamic law), and the term *duniya* (life), which is used to mean politics. He demonstrated, with selected examples from Muslim religious and legal scholars, the existence of distinction between religious and civil matters. Thus, he argues for the concept of distinction rather than separation or differentiation. The scholar cited Abou Ishaq al-Shatibi, who distinguished between *Ibaadaat* (matters of worship) and *Adiayaat* (matters of living), as well as others, like Ibn Hibban and Ibn Hazm. The same scholar argued that "there is a religious function of the Quran; and a life function." In order to demonstrate this distinction in functions the scholar pointed to how two (Imam Malek and Imam Shafi'ai) of the main scholars of Islamic jurisprudence doctrines ruled on issues of regulation of market prices. According to this Moroccan expert, for Imam Malek price regulation is a concern of the ruler (state/ politics), whereas for Imam Shafi'ai it is a matter of religion. Another example where the two Imams had different opinions was the issue of the ownership of a cultivated land that was arid: should it go to the cultivator or to the state to decide what to do with it? For Imam Malek it is for the ruler (politics) to decide, whereas for Imam Shaifi'ai it was is a matter of religion.

The other line of argument, the same scholars argues, for the distinction between *deen* and *duniya* in the Islamic tradition is Revelation and Prophet Muhammad deeds. He gave examples of instances when the Prophet consulted on critical issues with the inhabitants of Medina; such as what happened during the siege of the Medina by non-Muslim Quraysh tribes. The scholar argued that had all matters been the concern of religion, the Prophet (who has the Revelation) would not need to consult with Medina inhabitants and, in this case, accept their collective opinion on the matter.

That argument led a secular legal expert to comment:" if that interpretation is held by an Islamist then I have no problem with Islamist political parties who adopt that reading." He added that in some societies, religion is symbolic more than active in daily life. However, one Tunisian expert described this as "a secular reading of the Qur'an," and cautioned the scholar that to describe some deeds of the Prophet Muhammad as not religious is "dangerous," and furthermore nullifies the science of *sharia.* Another Salafi participant opined that the division between religion and politics is unsuitable to the

Middle East and North Africa, because the religion also has the role of organising daily life and political affairs.

Another Salafi scholar, however, argued that there is not a complete distinction between *deen* and *duniya*. There is a difference between the jurisprudence ruling, which is religious; and the means of executing the ruling, which is a matter of *duniya* (politics). He gave the example of the appointment of a community ruler as a religious obligation (*deen*). The manner in which the appointment is carried out, is a political matter (*duniya*). In previous years, the – pledge of allegiance - *bai'a* was the political mechanism by which the religious obligation of appointing leadership was carried out. In more recent years, the religious obligation remains, but the mechanism used to attain it is open to adaptation; for example, direct or indirect elections, electoral college, etc.

The domain of "religious" (*deen*) rules, influenced by doctrine, can be called the domain of prescription, as these rules concern the orthopraxy (correct conduct) of religion. How one prays, etc., follows a category of doctrine that is prescriptive to a large extent. In the domain of the influence of religion on "life", however, rules function in a "preventive" way: they say what you should not do, but do not prescribe what should be done. A rule forbids certain actions, but this gives options for a space where non-forbidden actions are possible. In the discussion it was noted that religious rules in matters of "life" constitute a "framework", which provides orientation but also allows for creativity. This distinction was accepted by the participants. It also allows for an explanation of how matters of "life" - distinct from religion in the prescriptive and ritualistic sense - are nevertheless "within the realm of religion," and not separated from it. At the same time, matters of "life" fall within a realm of flexibility, adaptation to contexts, and so on. This life-space is a location where actions can be agreed on across different religious communities, while remaining faithful to each community. From a religious point of view, it is what can become a "common civic space". This can be understood as the equivalent of "secularity" in a manner which is acceptable from a cultural and religious standpoint.

One Tunisian expert of political Islam movements concluded by saying that, at the end of the day, for society at large, the litmus test for Islamist actors would be "once in power, what alternatives [to the secular political project] have Islamists brought about".

3.2. DEMOCRACY, SHARIA AND ISLAMIST DEMOCRATS

The discussion of democracy, *sharia* and Islamist democrats produced a lively debate between the varied participants of the workshop. The debate mainly focused on differing interpretations of key features of Islamic jurisprudence, following on from the session on unity, differentiation and dissociation. There was notable divergence in participants' understandings of what public affairs fall under the religious sphere of influence. Concept of *hakimiya* (sovereignty) was discussed. One area of ideological dissonance in the discussion was the compatibility, and the similarities, between the principles of democratic government, and *sharia* law - Islamic jurisprudence. For example, one Egyptian Salafi scholar noted that we should distinguish between system principles on one hand and, and system tools and mechanisms. The principles of democracy align with Islam with regard to *bai'a* (oath of allegiance to a ruler) and to the will of the people. However, he argued, democracy as sovereignty of the will of the

people does not conform with Islam, in terms of its discourse on *hakimiya (*meaning the *sovereignty / primacy of the religious text as source of legislation)*. One secularist expert traced the concept of *hakimiya* back to the works of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and his book *Tabai al-Istibdad wa-Masari al-Isti'bad* (The Nature of Despotism), 1900, which was an attempt to found an Arab political science.

In response, another Salafi participant sought to demystify the concept of *hakimiya* as the supreme infallible source of legislation and governance, by raising the issue that, in all circumstances, the mechanism to fulfil it requires interpretation of the holy texts by a group of scholars who are not sacred. As an example, he noted that, "in Iran this mechanism is represented by the Council of Guardians." This comment drew participants' attention to the necessary role of "civility", *duniya*, in acting as an intermediary between the population and the religion. Importantly, one Moroccan Islamist scholar and political actor stated that politics is a matter of *duniya*, or "civility". He emphasised that "there is no such thing as an Islamic political system, and that the goal of organising the life of a population should be effected through *ijtihad*." He further noted that a civil state is (theoretically) neutral, and therefore holds a non-discriminatory position towards all faiths and convictions. This view was supported by a secularist Moroccan expert who argued that the concept of *hakimiya* and primacy of *sharia* as source of legislation, would lead to a problem of different or opposed interpretations, which would be a real problem in multi-ethnic or multi-faith countries such as Senegal or Nigeria. Therefore, a civil neutral state is the best solution, according to this expert.

A Salafi scholar responded that Iran under the *Wilayat al-Faqih* is a theocratic state whereas in Islam the ruler should be appointed by the will of the people, as was the case in the first four Caliphs who succeeded Prophet Muhammad during the first thirty years after his death. The scholar explained that deviation from the Islamic tradition in matters of statecraft started in the Umayyad rule when succession became dynastical. He reiterated that Islam shares with democracy the principle that the will of Umma or people is the source of power as the appointment of the first four Caliphs attests. Where Islam differs from democracy is in matters of sovereignty of legislation. While in democracy it lies with the people, in Islam it is embodied in Sharia. He argued that while in Islam there is a distinction between matters of *deen* and those of *duniya*, politics is not a matter of worldly sphere only but of religion as well. He explained that making treaties in Islam is a matter of Sharia that is governed by four conditions, in all four main doctrines of Sunni Islam.

Nevertheless, a secularist scholar noted that the comparisons between democratic (or Western) and Islamic forms of governance – such as democracy and *shura* (council), parliament, elections and *bai'a* – were made as early as the 19th century, notably by Ottoman statesmen including Kheireddine Ettounisi (Hayreddin Pasha). This scholar insisted that "the important thing is the function of the governance bodies and mechanisms being compared not their meanings," in the sense that what matters is the commonalities in the function, over the theoretical concepts in each system. One Tunisian Islamist noted a five-step process for comparing democratic and Islamic governance:

	Democracy	S*haria*
1.	The legal idea	*Fiqh Jurisprudence*
2.	Constitution	*Qur'an / Sunna*
3.	Law	Readings / interpretations of *Qur'an and Sunna*
4.	Implementation law	Implementation law
5.	Regulatory circular	Regulatory circular

This interpretation suggests that, although the procedure varies, the final outcome of both systems is the implementation of laws and legislation. This participant further quoted Ibn Khaldun, who said that governance can be effected either through a social contract, or through a religion. He explained that a Constitution can be a blend of both.

The exchange during this session was very deep and raised philosophical debates in both Islamic and Western tradition with regard to law, politics, religion and statecraft. French philosopher Jean-Pierre Boudin's theory of sovereignty and the works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau were discussed in historical parallels with their counterparts in the Islamic tradition including Al Shatibi, al-Qarrafi, al-Kawakibi and others. Experts agreed that an essential part of the debate about Sharia and democracy is terminology. The term secularity is very charged ideologically due to the MENA region's colonial past. One Salafi scholar offered to leave the terminology debate behind and agree on the common spaces where actors from different world views agree. The scholar pledged that as far as he is concerned if all agree to join efforts in order to establish a state based on the rule of law, justice, freedoms, and human rights.

3.3. LIBERTY AND VALUES

The discussion on the place of liberty and values in an agreed civil space included a reference to the reality of 21st century struggles for liberty of expression in North Africa, which one presenter linked to the impact of European culture on the region. The presentations raised issues including the existence of two value systems, called 'modernist' and 'traditionalist', which contribute to the differences of opinions between Islamists and secularists. The discussion on this topic also referred to the widely varied interpretations of 'liberties' that exist, including within the Islamic tradition – for example, one participant referenced the difference between the 'Medina era' concept of liberty and the Sufi concept of spiritual liberty.

One presenter drew an important link between culture and politics, stating that the culture of a nation necessarily shapes its political structures. This could mean patriarchal systems, 'family-based' systems, religious affiliation-based systems, among others. Therefore, cultural and religious-

based morals also impact the values basis of modern political systems. One Salafi participant also noted the relationship between liberties, values and religion, clarifying that Islamic jurisprudence views 'liberty' as the antithesis of 'slavery', and therefore a necessary goal. Both secularist and Islamist presenters in this session agreed on the need to develop common values. The discussion of one secularist participant produced four recommendations for improving social cohesion, including 1) a programme of comparative religious education that does not produce judgements on other religious and irreligious trends, 2) creation of an institutionalised space for dialogue between different ideological trends, inspired by 'Medina values', 3) promotion of instances of democratic dialogue in the region, and the value of dialogue for sharing experiences, and 4) separation of political beliefs from religious beliefs – including secular beliefs.

3.4. CITIZENSHIP AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION

In a discussion between Islamists and secularists about citizenship and equal participation in the public sphere, the debate crystallised around the political impediments to equal citizenship, rather than religious preclusions to equal citizenship. Only one secularist participant noted a range of minorities in North African countries, particularly in Morocco, including religious minorities: Shi'a, atheists, Copts, Jews and Christians; sexual minorities; and other vulnerable groups including women, the elderly and the handicapped. The focus on equal citizenship in the political sphere is potentially a result of post-2011 regional political contexts, with deepened tensions between communities in North Africa, the Middle East and the Sahel; in addition to the current, developing political and diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Participants noted that the issue of equal citizenship and participation rests on the different relationship between the citizen and the state, in the region and in European countries like France. One expert noted that the basis of equal citizenship should be "a link between individuals, groups and the state" enshrined in law, and based on equality and non-discrimination. Furthermore, this expert noted that concepts of citizenship should be accepting of linguistic and cultural diversity. However, a Salafi participant noted that citizenship sometimes has a negative connotation in the region, because of its relationship to oppressive government, and to foreign interference. In this situation, he said, people prefer to imagine the issue in the framework of the '*umma*'. He indicated that this is part of the reason for a reliance on familial and tribal networks in the region, where government institutions do not share wealth and resources equitably with its citizenry. However, this tribal network can be understood as a counter-current to citizenship.

Importantly, one intervention raised the point that, in the region, powerful minorities can wield power unfairly, thereby disadvantaging the majority. This supported the view of one secularist participant, who esteemed that issues of equal citizenship in North Africa and the Middle East are related to the authoritarian power structures, and not to a conflicting understanding of the place and meaning of the theoretical engagement, of an individual, in the public sphere. A Saudi expert warned that "the fear from confronting the issues of citizenship and minorities might push the region into catastrophe, such as is the case in South Sudan, Yemen, and Syria." Another Lebanese

secularist expert reminded the audience that there is a legacy of citizenship promotion in the region that should not be overlooked, such as "the Wafd Party experience in Egypt, the national movement in Syria, Allal al-Fasi in Morocco, Habib Bourguiba modernization effort in Tunisia, and the values brought about by the Arab Spring." A number of recommendations on this topic, were presented including: 1) diffusing a modern definition of citizenship and avoiding monolithic definitions of citizenship (for example ethnic nationalism) and translating this into practical initiatives; 2) permitting religious and ethnic diversity in each country; and 3) managing the question of minority groups as an internal, national issue, without accepting outside intervention.

Political actors' discussion of these themes focused more on inclusive political participation, and sought to elucidate the factors that can impede this in modern societies of the Middle East and North Africa. Within this discussion, one Salafi presenter noted that, while religious actors may be guilty of abusing the public sphere for religious preaching, so too can secular actors use the public sphere to advance their own ideology. This participant reiterated that political action is to work in the general public interest, suggesting that the general public cannot be contained by ideological identity markers. Another participant noted a key issue in the equal political participation of actors with a religious reference and actors with none – namely that there are significant differences of opinion regarding what falls into the religious sphere, and what falls into the civil space. On this point, a participant added that the frontiers between religious and temporal have changed in recent decades (for example through the propagation of religious legislation), and further noted that "an expansion of the religious sphere further calls into question the necessity to separate what is religious and what is civil."

4. COUNTRY CONTEXTS

To deepen participants' understanding of the shape and scope of the debate between secularists and Islamists, and to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of this issue, the workshops included country-specific sessions on the issue of religion and politics in the public sphere. In these sessions, experts and political actors from both secularist and Islamist tendencies reflected on these questions within their national contexts, which demonstrated the very different issues that currently affect possibilities for cooperative work in the public sphere. These sessions included North African countries (Tunisia, and Morocco), but also countries from other regions such as Turkey, Syria, and Mali, and demonstrated the different ways in which the relationship between the religious and the political can be approached.

It is notable that the role of the media in fostering the lines of tension between Islamist and secularist actors in North Africa was mentioned on numerous occasions in this discussion. This reality suggests that responsibility for these tensions does not exclusively lie with the political and civil actors, but also with other government and independent institutions.

4.1. THE TUNISIAN CONTEXT

The discussion around religion and politics in Tunisia demonstrated the very different political climate that the nation has experienced since 2011. The opening up of the political field to political actors and movements with a religious reference led to a rejuvenation of the meaning and practice of

religion and politics in the public sphere. Both Islamist and secularist presenters noted that popular religiosity was stifled under former presidents, Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and that "the Tunisian uprising opened the field for religiosity to return in a big way." However, other political actors noted that the Ben Ali government was not secular, but in fact selectively used religion to its advantage, and when convenient.

One Tunisian participant indicated that tensions in Tunisia have not only been between actors with religious references but also between actors with none. He referred to how, after Ben Ali's deposition, a struggle began between various types of *Salafi* imams, and the *Ennahdha* movement, for control over Tunisian mosques. Another participant referred to the return of 'religiousness' that came about after the Tunisian 2011 uprising, and noted the creation of numerous charitable and academic associations with a religious reference, as well as the "constitutionalising" of various religious institutions. One political actor noted that the deterioration of national religious establishments is to the general detriment of religious life, and ultimately benefits unregulated preachers on TV channels and others. Numerous observers have, however, noted that the concept of state religious establishments has suffered in the region, due to the manipulation and instrumentalisation of faith by authoritarian governments.

Speaking on the Tunisian post-uprising experience, one participant noted that recognising the other does not mean accepting the beliefs of the other, but that it is the basis on which coexistence is possible. He noted that this is a very important distinction, and that an example partially solidified in Tunisia. The view was also expressed that Tunisia requires reform in its religious leadership, in order to reinforce national cohesion, and to maintain and build upon the progress made to date.

The central question here is how can a political party avoid confusion between its identity and ideological reference on one hand, and that the identity or multi-identities of the society it strives to serve. An Islamist party is for Islamists only or for all the society in its diversity. This awareness in terms of the identity of party and the identity of the society would dictate the party's distance from Islam, that it considers as its reference. Besides, it would determine the party's political programme and alternatives. Another expert pointed to the need for distinction between the place of religion in party politics. History of popular movements in the region since colonial era until now shows that religion is always present either as the subject-matter and raison d'être on one hand, and religion as a means or tool on the other. The former makes building coalitions difficult, while the latter facilitates building coalitions among political parties with different ideologies. Tunisian and Egyptian political parties such as Destourian Party and Wafd Party respectively used Islam as subject-matter of identity in order to confront colonialism. Tha'alibi used religion to preserve identity and revive Islam, while Bourguiba used religion as a tool or means for liberation during the national liberation struggle.

One Tunisian political actor noted that, while the Islamist Ennahdha Movement demonstrated organisational capabilities, it did not have any political experience with which to direct its policies immediately following Ben Ali' regime downfall. Political commentators and observers have similarly reiterated this issue with reference to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and a variety

of political groups in Libya, demonstrating that the lack of political acumen among Islamist political actors is a debilitating factor for their engagement.

4.2. THE MOROCCAN CONTEXT

The discussion around religion and politics in the public sphere in Morocco demonstrated a very different context, informed by a distinct political history. Notably, the monarchy has played an important role in the management of religion and of politics in the Moroccan public sphere. The discourse of Moroccan Islamist and leftist participants in this session evoked the different ways in which religion and politics can interact in the public sphere – both at the level of government and in social relations. Opinions of the Moroccan participants were divided in their attitude towards the role of the Moroccan King, with some opposing his involvement in religious affairs, and others supporting his position as 'Commander of the Faithful'. One Islamist political leader noted the distinction between the public space and the private sphere, and the importance of respecting the 'other' in the public sphere. A leftist party leader equally made the notable point that exclusion from society leads to extremism.

One presenter noted how religious institutions and scholarship were "confiscated" by the Moroccan state, and suggested that these have therefore lost credibility in the eyes of some citizens. Notably, he pointed out occasions on which the government had used religion as a political tool for managing the opposition, including political groups, religious leaders and scholars. This presentation referenced different political strategies using religion, from the 1950s through to the present day. With this reading, the presenter recommended that the government should not monopolise religious authority, and that this should be based on a common partnership with other, independent, parties.

Another political leader referred to existing processes of dialogue in Morocco. Those initiatives are neither state- nor party-directed, but social initiatives. He equally noted that these initiatives are fragile, and can collapse at any moment. This participant made several recommendations for addressing the tension between Islamists and secularists in the public sphere, including 1) the development of mechanisms for mediation, 2) more accepting stances from political parties, and agreement to dialogue, and 3) debate around concrete issues, leaving aside ideological motivations.

The discussion around the topic of religion and politics in the public sphere in Morocco also raised an evidently contentious issue: that of ethnicity. Some discussion took place on the importance of recognising and respecting differences outside the religious sphere, and therefore in the cultural sphere too. One participant interjected that it is evident that all citizens of North Africa and the Middle East belong to various categories - including ethnic and class identities - but insisted that these differences should be overcome by focusing rather on common attributes.

4.3. THE TURKISH CONTEXT

The session of religion and politics in the Turkish context demonstrated the very different circumstances experienced by that country, and also informed by its distinct historical experiences of leadership and secularism. Notably, the Turkish expert indicated instances in the development of modern Turkey – including the Tanzimat Reforms, which intended to fundamentally revise the structure of the Ottoman Empire, in response to internal and external

pressures. Those reforms in turn affected the ideology of Republican Turks, as well as in other secularist camps.

The Turkish expert the AKP party strategy learned the lessons of Najemeddine Arbakan's Islamist party experience, whose discourse and party action remained traditional. The AKP party branded itself as a national popular party rather than an ideological party. This strategy allowed it to appeal to large sections of Turkish society beyond the Islamist base. The other factor in understanding the ascent of the AKP party is the extremist secular discourse of the Republican Party, which played in favour of greater appeal for the AKP party as a moderate and national political force.

4.4. THE MALIAN CONTEXT

The discussion on religion and politics in Mali concentrated on the experiences of the Sabati 2012 Movement, which the presenter described as a citizens' movement and not a political movement. The presenter noted that the Movement focuses on religious values, including peace, tolerance and coexistence, and leaves the management of religious practice to institutions including the church, the council of *ulama*, and others.

The Malian expert demonstrated that the historical context has had a large effect on the current form of politics in Mali. Notably, the presenter indicated that between 1960 and 1991, all religious institutions were banned in the country, indicating a broad suppression of community-based religious actions and association. The Sabati 2012 Movement is primarily concerned with issues like secularity, the role and status of women, and democracy, in a majority-Muslim country. The presenter argued, based on his experiences of working at the local level in Mali, for a structured, decentralised system of government, that gives local communities a greater say in how their affairs are run, according to their culture and to their understanding of democracy. This change would be within the context of the existing, secular Malian state, which the presenter defined as 1) a state with no religion, and with equal distance from all existing religions, 2) where there is state neutrality in questions of religion and 3) a state providing liberty of conscience. The discussion around religion and secularity in the Malian public sphere raised the issue of women's political participation as a central concern to the Sabati 2012 Movement. The presenter noted equally that there are numerous religious and cultural impediments to equal representation of women in the Malian government, for example, and other public posts.

4.5. THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

The discussion on religion and politics in the public sphere in Syria was held in the framework of a post-conflict rationale, in part to sensitise Syrian political and civil actors to the discussions and the potential frictions that can develop in a multifaceted society. The presentations of three civil society Syrian representatives affirmed that this is a potential common project for all national parties and groups, despite the fact that the country is suffering from the outcomes of current international political trends. The potential role of civil society was also noted in this discussion, as a balance to political parties. A female Syrian participant explained that the absence of dialogue before the uprising led to the current fragmentation of the opposition. She also warned that minorities such as Kurds and others live a state of victimization and are not aware of the need to contribute to building the national state. Another Syrian participant

demonstrated from NGO field experience how the need for NGO to cooperate and to obtain international donors funding contributed to a professionalisation of civil society action in Syria, especially the need to put ideological differences aside and joint efforts among national, secular, and Islamist, and Christian NGOs to work for the common good of Syrians.

5. EXPERIENCES OF DIALOGUE: UNDERSTANDING POTENTIAL AGREED CIVIL SPACE FOR COLLABORATION

The workshop included a session on regional experiences of constructive dialogue between secularist and Islamist actors, which contributed to demonstrating the potential for collaborative work between actors with different worldviews. These dialogues referenced very different political realities, but spoke volumes of the positive political and social results that can be drawn from an agreed civil space for interaction and common work.

The three examples of dialogue between Islamists and secularists included 1) the Algerian 1994 Rome Platform, 2) the Tunisian 18 October 2005 Dialogue and 3) the Tunisian 2014 National Dialogue.

5.1. ALGERIA: THE 1994 ROME PLATFORM

The context of the 1994 Rome Platform was a highly militarised and violent conflict in Algeria, brought about by a military coup against the electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in December 1991. In the period between 1991 and 2000, when amnesty was declared, "kidnapping, disappearances, assassinations, systematic torture, mutilations and reprisals became daily realties for Algerians."[22]

The Rome Platform at St Egidio provided an opportunity for Algeria's most influential leaders to meet and speak among themselves, and offered a space in which those leaders could "present their ideas on the direction the country should take and contribute to a solution."[23] After two meetings and many bilateral talks, the group at St Egidio agreed on publishing a text stating common principles. On 13 January 1995 that text was approved and signed by Abdenour Ali Yahia (co-founder and president of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights), Abdelhamid Mehri (National Liberation Front), Hocine Ait Ahmed and Ahmed Djeddai (Socialist Forces Front), Rabah Kebire and Anwar Haddam (FIS), Ahmed Ben-Bella and Kaled Bensmain (Algerian Democratic Movement), Louisa Hanoun (Workers' Party), Abdallah Jaballah (Ennahdha), and Ahmed Ben Mohammed (Authenticity and Modernity Algeria Party).

The text produced in this Platform was a declaration of principles to which Algerian parties and political figures, from across the political spectrum (including secular, socialist, Trotskyiste, democratic, and Islamist), could commit themselves to the peaceful resolution of the political crisis. The declaration rejected violence as a political

[22] 13 January 1995, text of the Rome Platform. Available at: http://www.santegidio.org/archivio/pace/algeria_19950113_FR.htm

[23] Impagliazzo, Marco, "The St. Egidio Platform for a Peaceful Solution of the Algerian Crisis," Private Peacemaking: USIP-Assisted Peacemaking Projects of Nonprofit Organizations, May 1998, 10. Available at: http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/30247/ichaptersection_singledocument/90a828b6-d4b4-4d2c-bdec-dc05d2fbfcb4/en/1998-3_may_pwks20.pdf

tool; supported collective and individual freedoms of race, gender, religion and language; enshrined Islam, Arabic and Amazigh as fundamental aspects of Algerian society; and reaffirmed commitment to freedom of confession and thought. The declaration also affirmed its respect for international human rights. The Rome Platform therefore constitutes "a valuable and innovative framework for the development of understanding and accommodation" between different schools of thought.[24]

5.2. TUNISIA: THE 18 OCTOBER 2005 DIALOGUE

The context of the 18 October 2005 Tunisian dialogue was a fraught national political scene. In that month, Ben Ali's government hosted a United Nations-sponsored 'Information Technology Summit', to which it invited then-Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon. This unpopular decision led to protests among Tunisian student bodies. Members of the Tunisian opposition in prison declared a hunger strike to protest against the UN's effective 'rubber stamp' on Tunisian values of modernity, while they perceived the suppression of basic individual and collective rights and liberties. These popular reactions were embarrassing for the government, which deployed greater numbers of security services.

Against this backdrop, diverse politicians, intellectuals, and civil society activists gathered to jointly develop ideas and programmes for Tunisian freedoms and liberties. The dialogue started in late October 2005, and was joined by representatives of the Ennahdha Movement, the Communist Labour Party, the Democratic Progressive Party, the Congress for the Republic, the Socialist International Labour and Freedoms Party and other non-governmental organisations. Notably, the Tunisian Democratic Progressive Party played a central role in the dialogue, because it was the first political party that opened up to Islamists and Democrats when it was established. They accept the secularism of the state but not that of the society. Hence, they have become the bridge between the secularists and Islamists.

The committee of the dialogue met in Tunisia and in Aix en Province, in France, to discuss their political demands for freedoms and judicial independence. The dialogue produced a number of documents on equality, human rights and torture, freedom of conscience, state and religion, identity of the state and society. Although the participants were generally committed to continuing the dialogue, each was under pressure from its party not to give concessions, or to betray party principles. The dialogue eventually produced a single document, later published in Arabic and French, and entitled *Notre Voie Vers la Democratie* (Our Path to Democracy). The October 2005 Dialogue ended around 2009, just before presidential elections, but it his was not announced publically. It played a key role as a foundation for the Troika government after the 2011 Constituency Assembly elections. One participant, who was involved in that dialogue, stated that "the October 2005 dialogue group constituted the strongest and most important and diverse opposition bloc to the Ben Ali regime before the revolution. But it did not resist after the revolution because it did not agree a general operational framework." Another Tunisian political leader concluded by saying that the 2005 dialogue was a joint action to confront authoritarianism. That context was different

[24] Impagliazzo, "The St. Egidio Platform for a Peaceful Solution of the Algerian Crisis", p. 11.

from the 2013 national dialogue, explained below.

5.3. TUNISIA: THE 2013 NATIONAL DIALOGUE

Tunisia has more recently provided another important example of Islamist-secularist dialogue, notably in the post-uprising 2013 National Dialogue. This process was documented in *Le Dialogue National en Tunisie*, published by the Association Tunisienne d'Etudes Politiques (ATEP) in September 2015. A lead researcher of this study took part in this workshop, to present her assessment of the importance of that dialogue.

According to the ATEP study, the participation and structure of the National Dialogue was significant to its success. The UGTT labour union, the UTICA business and professional lobby, the Tunisia League for the Defence of Human Rights, and the Lawyers Guild, became collectively known as "the Quartet." These four bodies were prominent and respected in, and representative of, Tunisian society; as one observer pointed out: "together, the membership of UGTT and UTICA represent the professionally-active population of the country."[25] According to an article from the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) in Zurich, Switzerland, "some members of the Quartet were also known to be close to the opposition and, as representatives of different sections of Tunisian society, all Quartet members had a stake in the outcome of the dialogue."[26]

The workshop raised three relevant results of the National Dialogue; 1) Nidaa Tounes emergence as a prominent Tunisian political party, 2) polarisation shifted from secularist-Islamist lines of tension to a debate between liberal political adherents and advocates of social justice, and 3) the UGTT labour union did not continue political engagement, but rather returned to unionist actions.

The final sessions of both experts' and political participants' workshops gave space for actors and observers to develop common ideas for future work on the topic of religion and politics in the public sphere, and to discuss individual and collective recommendations for each nation that was represented in the event.

[25] Hatem M'erad, Le Dialogue National en Tunisie (Tunisie: Association Tunisienne d'Etudes Politiques (ATEP)/ Nirvana, 2015), p.48.

[26] Frazer, Owen, "Mediation Perspectives: The Tunisian National Dialogue", Mediation Perspectives, Centre for Security Studies (CSS), 1 April 2014. Available at: http://isnblog.ethz.ch/conflict/mediation-perspectives-the-tunisian-national-dialogue

CONCLUSIONS

One objective of Istanbul workshops 2016 was to sensitise religiously-inspired political actors of the North Africa region to the different contribution of "secularity", in various historical/geographic contexts, and how it differs from "secularism", following on from key conclusions of previous NAWAT workshops. Another objective was to contribute to ensuring that religiously-inspired political actors in North Africa are not excluded from political participation, and that both secularist actors and faith-based groups adopt an inclusive approach to actors of different world views.

Throughout five days of exchange and discussions a consensus emerged among experts and political actors around a number of issues. First that there is no basis for a theocratic state in Islam; and that Prophet Muhammad's rule in Medina as well as how succession was conducted in his last days and during the reign of the four Caliphs after his death attests to that. Second, there is large consensus among main Islam's doctrines that there is a distinction between worldly matters and religious matters. And that religious matters are subdivided as well in matters of worship, on one hand, that are governed by the Quran and Sunna; and on the other hand, matters of life that are open to Ijtihad and interpretation according to the context (time, space, etc.). Third, there has been relative consensus among experts and large consensus among political actors that in matters of life there is room for a civic space where worldviews could meet and tolerate one another and work together for the common good. This space is neither religious nor secular but rather civic.

The participants recommended pursuing three potential areas for common civic space collaboration among actors with different worldviews in North Africa. In Morocco, three themes have been proposed by Moroccan participants a) intra-Islamist relations, i.e. between PJD, Adl wal Ihsane and Salafi actors; b) alleviating Salafi - Amazigh tensions; and c) Salafi detainees. In Tunisia, the issue of how to ensure that the so-called War on Terror's discourse and policies do not lead to repression of all Islamist actors (such as political parties, NGOs and charities, Imams, etc.), which would threaten the political transition and gains in democratic government.

These issues also have regional resonance as demonstrated by the recommendations made by participants from the Sahel and Middle East. In Syria, it was recommended to bring together dialogist actors from three ideological trends, creating an "historical bloc… made up of moderates from nationalist, Islamist and liberal currents."[27] It was also recognized that there is need for dialogue between Islamist and secularist Syrians. In Mali, participants expressed the need for deeper and broader discussion of the concept of secularism in the Sahel region. One Malian participant pointed out that "there is a new brand of religious leader; in tune with modernity, well-educated, professional, and who understand state mechanisms. They no longer accept the treatment reserved for traditional religious leaders in Mali." Practically, dialogue is necessary between secularist and Islamist non-government organisations, on how best to improve the condition of women in the country.

[27] "An historical bloc refers to an historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies, or broadly, an alliance of different class forces politically organized around a set of hegemonic ideas that gave strategic direction and coherence to its constituent elements." Gill, Stephen, Power and Resistance in the New World Order (Palgrave, Macmillan, 2002) 58.