



## The Tunisian Alternative Can Democracy and Security co-exist in the Middle East?

In a televised broadcast two days ago, the Tunisian minister of Justice, *Béchir Tekkari*, declared that Islam is a religion for all Tunisians and that no single party or institution shall claim it exclusively as its own. It was his explanation, however, that took many analysts by surprise: **“Agreeing to establish a political party, with a platform based on Islamic principles, is tantamount to accusing all Tunisians of being “non-believers.”**

Essentially, the minister used the concept of “*takfir*”<sup>1</sup> (an accusation of heresy often leveled by Islamists against others) to defend the Tunisian government’s rejection of all religious-based parties.



Many Islamic commentators were quick to denounce his argument by pointing to several political parties in Europe that incorporate the word “Christian” in their names, without offending all other Christians who do not belong to these parties. Such comments ignore the fact that, despite the name, none of those European parties have platforms based on religious dogma.

*Rashid al Ghanouchi*, head of the illegal *Nahda* (revival) party in Tunisia, and others saw the minister’s declaration as a setback. Observers had mistakenly perceived government actions, such as the authorization of a radio station for the recitation of the *Quran* and the government’s release of some jailed members of the *Nahda* movement, as signaling a more relaxed government attitude towards religion. Some observers were even suggesting that these government actions represented a shift in attitude towards Islamists from containment through confrontation, arbitrary arrests and prosecution to containment through inclusion. They were wrong.

As UN Secretary-General *Ban Ki-Moon* arrives in Tunis for an international counter-terrorism conference, [PI Online](#) takes a look at the ramifications of fighting religious radicalism the Tunisian way. The Tunisian constitution proclaims that the country is Moslem, but the government has clamped down Singapore-style on all activities, including political Islam, that could constitute a challenge to the regime. Most observers believe that, as a result, while security, economic growth and women’s rights have advanced,<sup>2</sup> democracy and freedom of expression have suffered. Watching the sectarian violence in Iraq, the Hamas takeover of Gaza and the ascendance of the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt, one must wonder if it is feasible in a religious environment hijacked by fanatics to ensure security while simultaneously spreading democracy. Tunisia, for one, appears to have concluded that it is not. They may be correct. In the Middle East, unless and until a more tolerant form of Islam has emerged, particularly among the Sunnis, security concerns may have to take precedent over certain democratic principles.

Tunisia’s critics also assert that by clamping down on political Islam Tunisia’s secularist regime has exported terrorism to other North African countries and Europe. They cite, for example, the November 6th arrest in Europe of twenty Algerian and Tunisians for allegedly recruiting suicide bombers for Iraq and Afghanistan. If, however, there were a causal relationship between secularism in the Muslim world and the export of terrorism, logically the converse would also be true. But, it is not. Saudi Arabia is the prime example. Despite its conservative religious government, many of the terrorists who have been “exported” around the world have been of Saudi origin.

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<sup>1</sup> A seminar in Tunis on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October discussed methods to confront and fight the ideology of *takfir* (the practice of declaring people as non-believers), which is on the rise in Tunisia. In explaining the problem, Professor *Abdelhaq Seyud* stated that *Takfir* is not an expression of opinion; rather it is a criminal accusation and a call to kill.

<sup>2</sup> Tunis has prohibited polygamy and given women the right to request a divorce, a right normally reserved only for men in the Muslim world. The government has also restricted use of the veil, which some view as emancipation but others see as abridging religious freedom.

Source: Islam Online – Author: Khalid Abu-Bakr – November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
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