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Religion and Prison in Contemporary Muslim Societies: Religious Intervention in the Carceral Space of Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract: To date, no scientific literature on the issue of religion in prison has been published in Muslim countries. There, religious practice in prison does not seem to have received specific normative attention. The new political context after the so called “Arab Spring” has given new importance to religion in the space of state institutions. Under the pressure of security concerns, we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of religious intervention in prisons. On the basis of a multi-year research project in Europe, which was recently extended to the context of Muslim-majority countries, this article intends to take stock of the reality of the case of Tunisia, where the essential elements of this theme intersect, by calling on initiatives of state institutions, but also the development that has taken place in civil society.

Keywords: Islam; Tunisia; prison; imam; religious intervention; carceral space



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1. Introduction

The relationship between religious manifestations and prison in the Muslim world is a theme that has received more attention from politicians than from social scientists. The same lack of interest by the latter was also evident in Europe, at least until the late 1990s. Only in the last twenty years has the topic received considerable attention from the social sciences (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Khosrokhavar 2004; Becci and Roy 2015; Becci et al. 2016; Béraud et al. 2016; Rhazzali 2010, 2020, 2021; Rhazzali and Schiavinato 2016)¹. In the United States, conversely, research on the forms of religious life in prisons has a long tradition, dating back to the late nineteenth century (Ignatieff 1978).

To date, no scientific literature seems to have been published on this topic for predominantly Muslim countries. In this context, practices and spaces devoted to religion have not historically been the object of specific normative attention, unlike in the West, where religion has always had a place in the space of prison structures (Beckford 2011; Becci 2018).

In recent years, the context of Muslim countries has given great importance to religion as a topic of public debate and has produced legislative actions. New religious authorities, such as the al-Wa‘iq-a (preacher/female preacher) and al-Murshid-a (guide/female guide), have been planned, operating not only in mosque-related services, but also in the public space and in state institutions such as prisons.

This unfolding of new religious professions generally occurs in the context of a contingency in which state institutions are pressed by major situational constraints (Aldrich 1979). The state thus tries to respond to the challenge of the moment by considering the religious institution as a partner in the fight against terrorism. This new configuration requires new forms of intervention, no longer ‘secular’ as before (educators, psychologists, doctors, social workers, etc.), led by emerging religious authorities. The forms of intervention by the operators are, thus, in discontinuity with the institutional history (Wilsford 1994) of prison

structures and in the complexity of their relations with the environment, the norms or the organisational modalities (Scott and Christensen 1995), which previously regulated them.

There are two pressures on prison structures in these countries. One is the fear of being seen as a breeding ground for violent extremism, hence, the need for special interventions to contain this phenomenon. The second stems from the concern about the negative image produced by prison overcrowding and the lack of human rights, including religious rights. The humanisation of prison conditions and the reform of prison systems are leading to new operational procedures. A field of action by international NGOs, supported by UN and EU agendas, is forcing many prison systems in Muslim countries to bring religion into prisons through the door of fundamental rights.

This study is a part of a multi-year research project carried out in prisons in Europe. It aims to present some of the results of research on the theme of religion in relation to prisons in Muslim countries, in particular Tunisia. It aims to explore the role that religion plays in a context of profound change, caused by the developments following the fall of the Ben Ali regime from 2011. This article analyses the relationship between the set of structures operating within the religious institution and the State. In particular, the relationship between the political institution and the prison institution is described, based on the reconstruction of the actions developed in Tunisian prisons during the post-revolutionary period.

2. Methodological Note

The data on which this article is based are part of a multi-year project that has been ongoing since 2016. The main thrust of this research focuses on the analysis of religion in the space of state institutions within Muslim-majority countries, in prisons and hospitals in particular. The research aims to highlight the role of religion in the dynamics of these organisational fields, considering the relationships between them and the overall institutional environment they interact with and the processes of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977) that tend to redefine their characteristics. Starting from a framework that promotes the established approaches of the literature on the subject of religions in the space of state institutions, integrated with the contributions of the neo-institutionalist perspective (Powell and DiMaggio 1991), the aim is to take into consideration the forms of relations that develop in particular between institutional structures and environmental pressures. The latter push them in different directions, thus, highlighting dynamics that are asserting themselves on a large scale and in the current conjuncture of socio-political processes involving Muslim countries, dynamics that find in the space of the prison the place of their most intense manifestation.

To date, the prison regulations of eight countries² have been analysed, and semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a total of fifty people related to the Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian nationality (from 2016 to 2022). An additional 50 interviews and five focus groups were conducted with government officials and religious workers in six Muslim countries³ (from 2015 to 2022). Ethnographic observation was carried out at different times in religious institutions, hospitals and penitentiary administrations in three countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). Despite repeated requests to the relevant authorities, it has not been possible to visit the prisons in situ to date. The day (23 February 2016) when the author of this study exceptionally obtained an authorisation, accompanied by the director of the Mornaguia prison in Tunisia, coincided with the outbreak of a prisoner revolt. The initiative was, therefore, obviously suspended.

In the specific case of Tunisia, the author has tried to understand how religion is defined in relation to prison⁴. To do so, he adopted a grid, bringing together three main perspectives: (1) that of the prison institution, through the analysis of documentation, official communication and interviews with prison officers; (2) that of the religious institution, in particular the Ministry of Religious Affairs; and (3) that of secular and religious associations operating in the prison environment. He, therefore, adopted different data collection strategies: analysis of legislative texts, Islamic documents and websites, Facebook

profiles and audio–visual material of institutions and associations concerned with religion in prison and prisoners' rights, including prison staff unions. Four ethnographic visits were carried out in Tunis (three months in total, between February 2016 and March 2022)⁵, during which twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted (twelve Muslim prison workers, three Catholic chaplains, two leaders in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and three supervisory officers belonging to the trade union). In addition, there were also 10 ethnographic discussions (the former Minister of Islamic Affairs, Nouredine Khadimi, two leaders of the General Directorate of Prisons and Rehabilitation, three prison guards and two probation officers, a doctor and a teacher), the facilitation of two focus groups (one with five members of the Jousouri think tank (consultants to the Minister of Religious Affairs 2011–2014) and the other with five members of the Al-Wassatiyya Association) and two periods of ethnographic observation at the headquarters of Al-Wassatiyya (3 days, during which discussions with six prison stakeholders were conducted) and the headquarters of Jousour (one day).

3. Religion and Prison in Muslim Countries

In the European context, the reconstruction of the role assumed by religion within the prison context cannot ignore its inclusion in the development of the complex relationship between religion and the state and the effects of this interaction on the heritage of forms developed by both (Becci 2018).

In the case of the Muslim world, which is, in many ways, multifaceted and differentiated, it can be seen that Islam, from the time of the caliphates (Tillier 2009) until the period of decolonisation and the emergence of modern states, has occupied a very different position, conceptually and practically, from that of Europe, despite the non-secondary importance it assumed for the prison context of those societies⁶. The Islamic religion appears here as an essential component of the domain of authority and law, while it has no pastoral, accompanying or spiritual assistance role. According to our observations, the notion of Tawbah, which refers to the notions of repentance and penitence in the religious lexicon, is not particularly present in prison practices and discourses.

With the post-colonial phase and the progressive affirmation in Muslim countries of the model of the modern state, the prison became part of an essentially 'secular' perspective, owing a great deal to European models in terms of the rationality applied to prison organisation techniques. The reference to a symbolic order of a religious kind seems to be absent. To date, field observations have confirmed that the presence and influence of religion in institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, prisons and barracks is very limited, if not almost non-existent. It is only recently that religious operators have appeared in these spaces, as the latest figure legitimised when playing a role of care, assistance and support in education and rehabilitation programmes. On the other hand, an analysis of the laws and regulations of these institutions revealed that they do not provide in any way for the presence of a stable religious authority linked to a symbolically marked space, nor even for the taking charge by the prison institution of the eventual inmates' need for religious and spiritual care. Significantly, in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, where there has always been a significant Christian minority, some tentative openings have been precisely related to the recognition of their religious rights. For example, the visit of a religious person has been allowed and provided for in the prison regulations since decolonisation, while there is still no provision for a permanently active service in the prison⁷.

In our research, the author analysed prison and hospital regulations in eight countries up to 2011 (taking into account changes between 2001 and 2011). Their respective legislators does not dwell much on the religious dimension. It mentions religious practice as a right of prisoners. It refers, in an abstract way, to the right to manifest one's religion and to receive a visit from a man of religion. It does not address the particularity of the Islamic religion and does not identify a specific authority. Reference is made to the man of religion and the preacher, which are, in any case, more general categories. Comparing the rules with reality, there is a tendency to leave the competence and legitimacy of management to the prison

institution. These developments which, to varying degrees and in a large part of the world, have led the penitentiary institution to increase the articulation of the re-education and rehabilitation dimension, in these Muslim countries, seem in particular to have proceeded by maintaining a secularised profile and without the constraint of the involvement of the religious actor in these procedures (as is the case of chaplains in many European countries).

It is noteworthy that the history of the modern form of the State in Muslim countries has produced an ostensible reality of large religious institutions embedded in bureaucratic apparatuses and administered by the political, with differences related to the constitutional systems, the characteristics of the political history and the 'ethnic' plurality of each country (Frégosi 1995; Kerrou 2014). Through them, the State can act in crucial ways on religious education, the life of mosques and religious communication (Brown 2017). Religious institutions (in the form of bodies dependent on the presidency or the Council of Ministers), thus, constitute a complex of administrative instruments at the service of the State. At the same time, however, they consolidate the role of religion in the regulation of large areas of social life, from family law to education. They are, thus, able to significantly influence politics and institutions while retaining their autonomy within the constitutional framework of the State. Religious institutions also retain this ability to relate to unofficial forms of Islam, which tend to compete culturally and politically with state institutions and political regimes (Brown 2017). The state is, therefore, often committed to restraining unwanted expansions of its initiative.

Yet the weight of tradition, which has seen religious intervention as absent from prison design and practice, has contributed decisively. Not long ago, the religious institutional was kept out of prisons. Religious actors did not have, in the range of their competences, a consolidated legitimacy at the doctrinal level to intervene in this field.

In recent years, this framework has been challenged by new forces linked to global political dynamics which, by questioning the role of religion in the public sphere, reflected on how to take into account the specific reality of prisons. In this context, international, but also internal, pressure to adapt prison organisations and their institutional culture to respect human rights and, thus, to redefine the space of religion in prison life has played a decisive role.

The intersection between prison issues and the emerging danger of violent radicalisation is also significant. The need to prevent the effects of possible proselytism in prisons, therefore, has led to the logic of international collaboration, not only on the purely securitarian level but also on programmes that involve religious institutions in order to deconstruct the structures of jihadist religious legitimisation. Algeria and Saudi Arabia were the first to implement some measures in prisons, followed by Morocco and other countries.

A new environment, or if one prefers, a new organisational field, has thus been determined, in which partially or entirely new actors and modes come into play. The need to act at an intersection between the prison field and the processes that develop in much larger spaces, but which are reflected in it and potentially receive new impulses from it, gives importance to the religious dimension. It thus embodies a symbolic resource. The State and religious institutions are confronted with religious and cultural offerings that are partly beyond their control. They experience the constraints produced by the interaction with their organisational fields (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) in relation to similar fields on an international scale. But also with the resulting institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977), through which circulating 'standard' operational models tend to be imposed and generalised. An example of this is the case of France, where a secular state—whose prison model has been historically relevant for Maghreb countries—in the interaction of its prison policies to counter religious radicalisation and jihadist-type proselytism with the actions of local Islamic organisations, ended up inventing a new religious figure (Rhazzali 2015; Béraud 2019) called 'Aumôniers musulmans' (Béraud 2019).

Faced with a state that has difficulty maintaining a monopoly on the regulation of religion, official and unofficial Islam (Brown 2017) have the opportunity to go beyond the limits of their usual framework (from the mosque to the web), crossing institutional spaces

that were previously impenetrable. Thus, the traditional centres of theological culture, Al al-Azhar (Egypt), ez-Zitouna (Tunisia) and al-Qarawiyyin (Morocco), are regaining their importance and seem to be rediscovering their capacity to propose new ideas in the reform of the religious field.

In order to strengthen its religious offer, apart from the mosque and the traditional places, the religious institution, partially controlled and partially autonomous (Brown 2017), retrieves a device compensated by an isomorphic dynamic. This is present on an international scale and always linked to the need to involve the religious institution in the prevention of radicalisation. This used to correspond to one of the functions included in the tasks of the imam or khatib: al-Wa‘d (preaching) wa (and) al-Irchād (good-guidance). It is given the following definition: ‘Religious, educational and pedagogical function aimed at, among other things, the spiritual, social, political, cultural and economic development of individuals’⁸.

This function, attributed to al-wa‘id and al-murshid, two new authorities, incorporated in the state administration, began to be included in various projects on the reform of the religious field in Muslim countries. This function, defined in regulatory acts by objectives that are not purely religious, is promoted in political discourses by emphasising its legitimacy according to Islamic doctrine⁹.

The political institutions review the role of the mosque, which is now conceived as a community-based organisation, to educational and social intervention roles. At the same time, institutions of territorial management and control are created. In this way, the religious institution adapts to the organisational model of the State and to the complexity of the management of structures, which ends up segmenting the field and differentiating the legitimacy of the different actors and structures.

In short, in these countries, new religious personnel are recruited and supported by the State. They are placed not only in educational activities within local mosques but also in prisons, hospitals and military bases¹⁰. One can, therefore, observe a certain imitation of the partnership model of European institutions with Christian churches in all areas of public institutions. But neither the institutional documents nor the statements of the institutional actors, interviewed by the researcher, refer to this. This process is presented as the result of a great elaboration of the principles of Islamic doctrine.

4. Prison in Tunisia: An Attempt to Build a Religious Intervention System

The association between Islam and prison, in the case of Tunisia, seems today to recall, for many, the line of repression of Islamism established during the years of the Ben Ali regime. This period saw prisons filled with opponents of the regime, a significant proportion of whom were destined to become the real pillars of Islamist-inspired political groups. These are currently among the most influential on the political scene, while another group includes many representatives of secular and socialist movements, even Marxists. This subject is, therefore, one aspect of the reconstruction of the country’s political history in the scientific literature and more broadly in journalistic production, although it does not fail to be present in the contributions centred on the theme of human rights and the violations to which they were subjected under this regime.

It would, therefore, be worthwhile to devote research today which, in addition to adapted empirical work, involves the best theoretical and methodological tools on the religious in the prison space in Tunisia. The Tunisian case may be paradigmatic in terms of the capacity of Muslim societies to integrate the religious issue in a context of high political tensions and the fight against violent extremism. Compared to other countries in the region, the relationship between religion and the State is very complex and, therefore, irreducible for attempts to conceal the conflicts it implies. This complexity is reflected in the processes of managing the role of religion in public life and in the processes of religious pluralisation and secularisation (Berger 1967) which also concern these societies. Many of the issues at stake can be found in the prison environment itself. Compared to other countries, the degree of secularisation of institutions and the impermeability of the organisational fields

of the “secular” institutions built by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes make it more difficult to model the religious in areas where they were previously marginal.

The results of our research are liable to provide some indications in this direction, since it partially integrates a data framework that concerns the choices made by political institutions and, on another side, the associative practices related to this theme in the years following the revolution.

But it is important to consider the sequence of events from a temporal perspective before relying on the analytical framework proposed here. The impact of the fall of the regime was important for the structural and organisational resilience of state institutions. The phase following this event challenged the institutional and environmental history of each institution in their organisational principles and their mythical and rational objectives. But the religious institution is the one most under pressure, for reasons related to its growing legitimacy, in particular, in relation to the entry of political Islam into the political arena and the irruption into civil society of others classified as illegal, unofficial (Brown 2017) or communal (Bras 2014). It took more or less four years, characterised by bitter conflicts between the secular wing of the Tunisian establishment and the new actors of political Islam, for the religious institution to adapt to the new context. It took an act of political rupture of the Ennahda party with its base, consisting of the separation between politics and religion in mosques and religious places, in order for it to regain legitimacy and ownership in the organisational field. This was achieved by relying on proven administrative and management systems from the past (Bras 2014), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, relying on actors circulating not only in Muslim countries, but also in European countries. They are considered to have a higher level of efficiency, not so much in terms of managing religious services, but in terms of fighting violent radicalisation. This second aspect gives tremendous legitimacy to the attempt to reposition the religious institution in terms of investment of resources. More resources are given to the ministry and the religious administrative machinery, countering the opposition, as well as other ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Health, etc.

Thus, in a context of great fluidity of institutional structures, the actors of Islamist affiliation are taking on an ever-wider space of action in society (Sigillò 2020), which also extends to prison. They were the first to establish relations with prison administrations to offer a religious service, presented as being better than the one offered in the past under the regime, in a context of great political confusion. When we talk about religious intervention in prisons, we wrongly assume that it is only related to the problem of detainees linked to terrorism and the opportunity to involve the religious institution in the treatment of these issues. However, there is more at stake. What these new actors are trying to do, surreptitiously, is to offer a permanent service for all prisoners, thus, becoming a permanent part of the prison structure and seriously altering its overall operating logic.

The association that the author presents in the following paragraph is the most important in this scenario. It can be considered as the one that pushed the State to rethink the model of religious intervention in prison. This was initially limited to the case of terrorists and fighters returning from war zones. It occurred when the State was accused of favouring Islamist activists in prisons, blaming it as responsible for the radicalisation of prisoners and the departure of many of them to Syria.

It should be noted that the association’s actions took place within the framework of the memoranda of understanding, which were perceived as collaboration with institutions that somehow had to take into account a political framework favourable to the presence of Islamists.

The construction of the need for a religious service in prison is undoubtedly the result of different processes that the researcher has tried to bring together in our analysis. It brings together the attempt to Islamise the religious offer by the actors of Islamist associationism and the reconfiguration within the framework of a more general re-historicisation of Islam or mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 151). The latter consists of the imitation of models of religious intervention in the public space experienced by other

Muslim countries to cope with similar situations of uncertainty and resistance to pressures for change from the prison institution.

The author takes this last process as a starting point to illustrate the original context in which all the other processes took place. The prison, by its nature as a total (Goffman [1961] 1991) and public institution (Becci 2018), subjects those who stay and serve there to a very high level of state control, and their practices and relationships are explicitly regulated or lacking. Although the presence of an Islamic religious operator may be considered important (and even be claimed by inmates and religiously oriented associations) in the prison context, it is not yet supported because of a normative constraint. The provisions regulating the religious in prisons are proving resilient even to traumatic and innovative events such as the fall of the regime. The establishment of a system of religious intervention in prison, even if it was originally declined in modalities specific to the Ben Ali regime, dates back to the end of the 1980s (Decree of the President of the Republic no. 1086 of 4 November 1988)¹¹. It came to the forefront especially in the post-revolutionary period. Inspired by European models, the decree affirms the freedom of worship and guarantees those who desire it the possibility of exercising it (Article 64). In addition, the possibility of offering religious and moral orientation programmes to prisoners, entrusted to preachers or educators sent by the management, is provided for. At the same time, access to the prison is allowed to outside religious authorities. It is also noteworthy that the Islamic religion is not mentioned in Article 65, where the term *Wu'ād* (pl. *wā'id*) refers generically to a religious preacher, as it does in other Muslim countries.

If the demand for religious rights in prison does not succeed in creating arrangements secured by new regulatory constraints, such a prison institution can play a role in increasing the available resources by justifying the material needs of rights enforcement.

5. Religious Intervention of Islamist Activists

Islamist-inspired associations in the new post-revolutionary Tunisian context are developing all-round strategies, seeking opportunities from the political to the civic sphere, thus, increasing the complexity of a political reality marked by intense conflicts since the beginning of the phase following the regime change (Sigillò 2020). But the activism of the new actors does not always find space and impact in strongly fixed organisational fields which have built their own legitimacy over time and their configuration of non-religious identities and relations. The prison space is already well established, with arrangements and agreements with national and even international secular associations. Despite this, a group of Islamist activists managed to break into this area by carrying out religious activities for two years (2011–2013).

In a context of great fluidity of institutional structures and frequent questioning of their organisational frameworks, the religious institution, represented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, suddenly found itself, as soon as the Ben Ali regime fell, in a field where it had to compete with other actors of the social and political organisational field. As for its legal profile and social legitimacy, Islamism was, at this phase, in any case, conditioned (Islamist associations were allowed but had to be integrated into the system of official Islam) when it attempted to take on the characteristics of an organisation empowered to intervene in civil society. If the post-revolutionary phase gave a legal status to Islamist-inspired parties, mainly Ennahda, it also allowed many Islamist structures, both new entities born in the orbit of Ennahda's Islamism and the older ones, to operate in society. They were previously operating underground or were linked to Salafism in its various forms and in contrast to Ennahda's political line.

Thus, a competition developed between several privileged actors in competition to win a role. Some actors acted in a logic of hegemony; others simply aspired to exercise religious activity in prison.

The *Jam'ia al-Wassatiya Li-Taw'ia Wal-Isلاح* (Centrist Association for Awareness and Reform) was the most important association in this context. It is a movement of a few dozen militants of the Salafist persuasion. According to Torelli and Arturo (2013, p. 36),

this association, despite its radical positions, is not to be placed in the orbit of jihadist Salafism. It does not incite violence, and its strategy of action also includes dialogue with state institutions, associations and, in some cases, foreign tourist groups, with the aim of enforcing the Sharia, insisting on the Muslimness of the Tunisian people. It started these religious activities in prison from the end of 2011, but they were suspended after one year by the Ministry of Justice.

The founding president, Adel Almi, is a very controversial figure because of the radical nature of his proposals formulated during many of his media interventions. In particular, we should mention the one relating to the wish for the application of Sharia law in Tunisia. He holds a secondary education diploma (speciality: arts and languages) and claims a solid training in Islamic sciences acquired by attending lectures of teachers at the Zitouna University. However, Almi did not follow institutional training courses. It should be noted, however, that none of the members of the association has a regular training in Islamic studies. The association brings together several people from other Islamist associations. In this regard, there was the idea of forming a group (in concrete terms, there are two women and seven men) to carry out a project of religious activities in prison. The authorisation granted to them allowed them to intervene in five prison institutes. The experience as a political prisoner in the past (during Ben Ali's regime) of Almi and of another member of the team seems to have been a decisive, motivating factor:

I had, and this is positive for me, I am positive about everything, in my life, I had the experience of detention. For 15 years, I was often arrested for 20 to 30 days. Passionate, very eloquent, I improvised myself as a Khatib (preacher) [. . .] I was advised not to pray in prison and not to talk about religion, because I risked being accused of something, and I answered, No! I was spontaneously acting as a Khatib. [. . .] this was in the 1990s. As soon as I had the opportunity, I went back to doing what I did when I was detained (Adel Almi).

Almi reported that the objectives of the religious activities were part of a more general action: "the realisation of a moral reform inspired by the Sharia throughout the Tunisian nation". For the group, its actions were conceived as an antidote to forms of deviance thanks to the virtues of a "correct" knowledge of Islamic precepts.

The religious actors entered the prison as visitors, and the proposed religious service was conducted, according to prison regulations, in the presence of a supervisory officer. The space for activities was heavily guarded and limited by normative dispositions (dating back to the period before Ben Ali's regime that remained in place)¹² which consisted of seminars ranging from doctrinal topics to stories of the prophets. These activities were carried out by a prison educator or by an external teacher or imam, but always under the control of the education officer (a secular official), after handing over the text to be used during the activities. However, the association obtained permission from the management for the members of the association to work with reduced supervision after having accredited the validity of their intentions by presenting a seminar on the prison radio aimed at everybody and also heard by the operators. In this institution, they also obtained additional credits by offering seminars on Islamic doctrine to prison staff. Wishing to achieve irchād, which consists of direct contact with the inmates, they offered courses in learning the Qur'an. This was an activity that presupposed a personal relationship with the students (which, in any case, is supposed to take place under supervision). During the seminars, they adopted strategies to achieve direct contact with the participants, moving from ex-cathedra lectures to discussion workshops.

Delving deeper into this point, based on the interviews and the focus group results, it becomes clear that the group's aim was to present themselves as spiritual assistants and companions. The model they referred to is not so much that of the wa'd and irchād as that of the Muslim chaplain in France or Britain. They explicitly referred to it and hoped that this function was recognised in a permanent way in prisons through the allocation of dedicated spaces.

The members of the group are volunteers, unpaid, and show strong motivation, which they emphasised when presenting the characteristics and meaning of their initiative.

When I was offered the opportunity, I accepted immediately. [. . .]. I thought it was time to work for our religion and our country, to work with those who want to become good citizens. I make some efforts but there was something in my heart that pushed me to do it (Imam, Moroj Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre).

Because this work is all about volunteering, and you need a certain vocation . . . As we come from civil society, they feel closer to us. Someone who does this for passion is different from someone who is sent by a state institution . . . That's why our interventions have been successful (Woman introducing herself as Mourchida (guide), Women's Prison, Mannouba).

The language they used to explain the importance of the project is permeated by religious categories. The civil repertoire is very prominent and is emphasised as a way of defending the project against an institutional interlocutor. They emphasised their contribution as the realisation of a true principle of citizenship and democracy. In their claim of the positive effect of religious service, one notices the use of two categories. These constitute the founding principles of the legitimacy (but also the myths) of the prison institution: re-education ('I'adat attarbiya) and rehabilitation ('I'adat atta'hil).

What emerges is a clear awareness and rapid adaptation of language from the organisational field where they hoped to establish themselves. This analytical framework reveals an attempt to segment (Scott and Davis 2007) the religious field by contextualising it in the prison space. Finding themselves in a condition of disparity in comparison with institutional actors (religious operators in charge of the Ministry of Religious Affairs), these new actors attempted to assert themselves through innovative and performative proposals, presenting these as rooted in Islamic doctrine and perfectly in accordance with the mission of a religious person. This particularly resolute attitude in the attempt to produce a segmentation of the religious field has ended up complicating the subtle balance between the two institutions (Penitentiary Administration and the Ministry of Religious Affairs), resulting in their marginalisation.

Following strong public hostility at the end of 2013, reinforced by the trade unions of the surveillance staff, this initiative was suspended. The trade unions, intercepting a degree of public sensitivity, put forward the argument that delicate issues such as religion and radicalisation in prison are the responsibility of the State and not of a Salafist association. The association was accused of being one of the main causes of the significant contribution of young Tunisians who left for the ranks of Daesh fighters. These accusations were not proven, and no judgement has been pronounced so far.

The president of the association, who has always firmly rejected these accusations, identified the trigger for the pressure to terminate this experiment as his proposal to promote the practice of mnemonic learning of the Qur'an.

Do you know how to learn the Qur'an? You learn it in 7 or 8 years, spending 7 hours a day. You should have a strong will. I said to myself: come on, I will encourage them. Those who are permanently condemned have a lot of time and can memorise a large part of the Koran, if not all of it. I thought we could also give them a diploma. So I wrote to the head of government and to the president of the Republic to make a proposal: those who learn the whole Koran by heart can be pardoned. Their reaction: you want to direct them towards your field, recruit them, influence them politically. I was never told what the reason for the suspension was. [. . .] The trade unions are very politicised and when they heard this, they accused me of many things [. . .]. I don't listen to them . . . (Adel Almi).

By the time of the final outcome, a climate had developed in which the association's orientation was confused with radical Islamism. The tensions that develop around the relationship between politics and religion are such that a proposal of this kind is loaded with political implications. This has happened even though, after all, it is in line with some

television formats in the Muslim world, where memorising the Qur'an or its Tajwid (psalm) becomes the raw material for some talent shows. It seems to be related to the great contest between the actors in the political arena and the competition that is developing between the protagonists of what can be called the religious 'market' (Berger 1963).

6. The "Religious Awareness of Prisoners" Project

The reaction of public opinion and of the trade unions of surveillance agents to the loss of control of prisons has played a role in the inclusion of Islamist activists in this field. There is a strong tendency to use the resource represented by the involvement of the religious institution in so-called de-radicalisation programmes, a model already established, with an isomorphic dynamic, in other countries, addressed to prisoners involved in terrorism-related crimes. However, the political situation, characterised by an extreme state of tension, made the religious institution deem that committing itself to this field was premature. The latter was already engaged in regaining control of mosques. It was also under pressure from professional organisations of religious leaders and imams who were protesting for higher salaries and allowances.

Forced to undertake efforts in order to re-establish control over religion in prisons (where, in addition to the activism of associations, there is also that of prisoners acting as imams), a project entitled "Raising awareness of religion among prisoners" has been implemented. In accordance with the provisions of the inter-institutional agreement, a method used in many institutional sectors was developed in the case where it was not possible to rely on structural rules. It was hardly possible to think of a structural change in the impermeable prison field. On the other hand, the issue at stake was not really about particular questions of religious law in relation to existing norms and the claims of prisoners; rather, it was a political conflict between 'state' and 'ex-illegal' Islam that found a battleground in the prison. It was not by chance that the launch of the project was favoured by the presence of Nouredine Bhairi in the government as Minister of Justice. He is one of the top leaders of the Ennahda party, and he is committed to the promotion of the state religious institution par excellence, the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The project only applies to Muslims, while, for foreign prisoners, the usual rules apply, and the situation seems to have been managed in a very cooperative way since the time of the regime. In Tunisian prisons, especially in the capital, there is a significant presence of non-Muslim prisoners who are from migration backgrounds. However, this does not seem to have any effect on the undergoing construction of the religious intervention device. In fact, this is limited to the presence of a Catholic chaplain who works less as a religious person or religious expert than as a social worker and socio-cultural mediator and who is useful in responding to material emergencies.

The project was launched on 6 December 2012, when the Ministry of Religious Affairs signed an agreement with the Ministry of Justice for the "religious awareness of prisoners", which aims to promote a correct knowledge of the Islamic tradition among those considered particularly vulnerable. This project, which runs in parallel with Al-Wassatiya, aimed to establish a systematic intervention for all Tunisian prisons in its first year of operation.

There is something about this context that is worth noting, as it makes one of the issues clear. The name of the action, 'awareness raising' (at-taw'īya), is not chosen by chance. It is precisely the object of tension and negotiation between the actors involved in the project. For the prison actors, terms such as training, education, rehabilitation and re-education cannot be linked to religious action. Symbolically and de facto, they are, above all, a matter of the penitentiary domain and are related to structures, personnel and bureaucratic arrangements. On the other hand, it is not possible to use the wa'd and irchād device, in use in other neighbouring countries. The justifications given to us during the research referred to the instability of the policy framework and the consequent difficulty in persuading institutional actors to converge on projects adequately supported in the implementation phase by the lack of materials. Ultimately, at-taw'īya presented itself as a point of mediation between opposing perceptions.

Between 2011 and 2014, the period of administration of one of the signing parties, Nouredine El Khademi, the organisation chart initially included 115 operators. They were then reduced to a maximum of thirty (the same number was also mentioned in 2019) under other ministers. The presence of women prisoners is very limited (average of 3% in recent years). Unlike other countries, which have chosen a dual track of authority for women, *wā'ida* and *murchida*, in the Tunisian case, women have only the device of *wā'ida*.

The areas of religious action, listed on the minister's Facebook page and confirmed by our fieldwork, are:

- Organising sessions on *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *Sira* (biography of the prophets), conducted by preachers, imams and specialist teachers;
- Conducting Qur'anic learning workshops, supervised by specialists in coordination with the Association of National Qur'anic Societies;
- Organising visits for prisoners by religious leaders on religious and national occasions;
- Performing prayers during the month of Ramadan and Friday and Eid prayers in some prison blocks, depending on the capacity available.

While the implementation of the first three lines of action was confirmed by the religious actors involved in the project, the last one does not seem to have been activated with the engagement of external actors. However, it seems that the activities carried out were in continuity with those that Islamist activists were already performing (at least imitating the standard provided by the model circulating in the transnational context). The reference to prayer is what they wanted. Who has the authority to organise the activity was not defined, as with the first three areas.

As regards the personnel to be employed, no new specific authority was created, as was the case in other countries. Reference was made to figures who were already in place at the time of the Ben Ali regime: *wu'ād*, imams of mosques and specialised teachers and those who were state officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education, co-opted to carry out voluntary work. An allowance was provided only in certain cases.

One of the imams involved in this project from the beginning summarised it as follows:

After the revolution, doors opened. [. . .]. There is a list, we were appointed by the Regional Directorate of Religious Affairs. We are volunteers. In the organisation of these activities, coordination by the prison directorate is important. The prisons have a person in charge of cultural activities who, in collaboration with the educational staff and psychologists, is responsible for raising the awareness of the prisoners about religion and in particular for coordinating all religious visits. There have been no applications, they have simply co-opted people they know and consider to be qualified (imam, working in Mornaguia Prison).

Here, it is both the articulation of the competences mobilised by the project and the organisational articulation of the activities which provide for interdisciplinary inputs that are highlighted. Moreover, religious awareness (also the title of the project) is a skill already covered in the organisational field of the prison under the direction of a cultural activities manager. In prison, the religious aspect is, therefore, neutralised and linked in its provision to its cultural value, thus, constituting a factor of resistance to organisational change.

The participants we interviewed seemed to share a very positive experience of their participation in this project.

I like to go in search of new realities, I am curious [. . .] It was important for me to discover this world full of humanity that needs help (Imam, Mornaguia).

I am not part of any political or ideological formation. I am neither Nahdaoui, nor Salfi, nor Sufi, thank God, I am a Muslim, I can accept everybody and I am happy like that. I am convinced of that (Wā'īd, Borj El Amri prison).

Prison is another world, completely different. You can't go there, you can only imagine it. The prison experience is the hardest [. . .] and I have compassion for these people. [. . .]

I don't care what they have done in their lives, what kind of crime they have committed ... (Imam, Mornaguia).

By nature, I like to discover and help others. [...] I have a lot of experience. I am an imam-khatib, I did music, I was in the scouts, I did sports. I also do sports education. I mean, I'm involved in different environments, I used to play the oud in a band. This different experience led me to the prison (Imam, Bizert and Ennadhour).

In the context of their actions, the religious actors emphasised the importance of creating a framework for stimulating creative interaction with the detainees. This could bring into play a variety of interests and practices and positively mix the religious focus with social and humanitarian sensitivities. The emphasis was not specifically on a religious or ideological orientation, but on the possibility to act without having to identify with the lines of an activism that presupposes belonging to a political or religious subject with an exclusive relationship.

Furthermore—and this is a very significant absence—the activity of moral and spiritual assistance and accompaniment was not mentioned in the formal acts and speeches of the institutional actors, nor spontaneously in the speeches of the religious actors. When asked about this point, they immediately positioned themselves in a pattern of interaction in which they assumed the role of state employees. While agreeing on its importance, they emphasised the limits of their institutional mandate, which does not include the exercise of functions for which they claimed to have no specific competence or training. They were also very realistic about the difficulties that such an arrangement could face given the high number of prisoners and the facilities that are not prepared to accommodate its implementation.

In a second phase, after the suspension of Al-Wassatiya, and having found itself without competitors, the ministry seemed to lose its desire to prioritise a religious intervention programme for all prisoners. In this context, the discourse on religion in prison seems to have been reduced to a simple consideration of the risks of religious radicalism. The focus was, therefore, on the opportunities that the prison environment might offer for jihadist proselytising. In the order of the priorities of a government that aspires to focus its attention on the religious discourse countering the threat of radical Islamism, the prison, along with the school, the mosque and the Internet, is becoming one of the areas where security is emerging as a major concern. It must be considered that, after the Khademi administration, the changing political framework led to a great deal of movement among the heads of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. These changes have not contributed to the creation of useful conditions to ensure developments in line with previous experiences.

Did the experiment continue?

Yes, but not in the way we had planned. The project was intended for all prisoners. It was important for us to do structural things, not just for the prison. They only focused on radicalisation [...] (Consultant (think tank Jousour) to the Minister of Religious Affairs 2011–2014).

In a context of global security concerns, he became the main actor in the dynamics of a new reorientation of the religious discourse in the face of the needs for control and prevention linked to a global horizon of reform of the religious field. It is clear from the interviewee's statements that he is aware of the importance of a general reform of the religious field in which the mosque, but also those who act within it, is given a multiplicity of roles.

We do not understand why the Ministry of Religious Affairs is focusing on prison ... rehabilitation. It is a very sensitive issue and they need to be competent and trained. For what we can do, we have no problem if we want to give religious lessons. But whoever does it must have a degree in sharia and doctrine. We are against giving this Ministry the power to authorise people to come and give lessons. We don't trust it. In the past there have been abuses and people and associations have arrived who were suspicious ...

we are also in contexts where there are vulnerable people (Member of the surveillance staff trade unions).

This interview confirmed the statements advanced by several sources regarding the highly polarised and politicised debate on Islam in prison. While proponents of interventionism consider that prisoners necessarily need education and *irchād*, opponents argue that, precisely because they are Muslims in a Muslim country, they do not need religious relief but secular assistance to alleviate the evils of the prison and promote their social reintegration. In any case, it appears that the mechanism of religious intervention developed so far by the State is considered by prison actors as not being adapted to the prison context and difficult to integrate into the organisational field.

7. Conclusions

In a context of widespread upheavals in society and institutions, the prison appears as a space in which the most important and current dynamics of socio-cultural and political transformation in the Muslim world are reflected. Old, even very old, institutions and recent cultural and political trends are brought into play, giving rise to organisational fields in which the strongly rooted specificities of the different countries, with their political and institutional history, are confronted with new processes of isomorphism that tend to redefine strategies and devices.

In Muslim-majority countries, religious institutions are generally integrated into the structure of the State and still play an important moral, social and, to some extent, juridical role. Forms of assistance and support in prison are conceived as purely secular functions and entrusted to the penitentiary institution within the Ministry of Justice. The Islamic religion is, therefore, extraneous to the pastoral and spiritual care vocation which has always figured in the history of prisons in Europe (Rhazzali 2015). In the Tunisian case, the legacy of this history is fixed in the centuries-old bureaucratic structure of the prison organisation. This is strongly protected by laws and regulations, which, after 2011, have been under continuous pressure. These pressures are reflected in national and international demands for prisoners' rights. They are also the result of a need, felt as a priority by the State, to respond to the risk of prisons being involved in radicalisation processes. This opens up a space for debate and action that highlights, although motivated by security concerns, the dimension of rehabilitation and prevention objectives, and, therefore, of education and culture, of prisons.

On the one hand, this situation seems to call for the intervention of the actors of institutional Islam, with its symbolic heritage, in order to counter the claimed religious legitimacy of radical movements. On the other hand, the State fails to effectively address the objective of a global redefinition of the role of religion in the public space. It struggles to devise arrangements to provide religious assistance within the prison setting.

It is quite understandable that this issue seriously affects the sensibility of unofficial Islam, which, before the change of regime, was on the fringes of legality. As part of a comprehensive religious–political proposal, it aims to penetrate traditionally inaccessible areas, segmenting them and rooting its presence in them. It proceeds by segmenting them and rooting its presence in them.

The religious intervention of the new operators is not alarming in itself. It is provided for by the regulations, and its management—administration and surveillance—is entrusted to the prison camp by the same regulations. It is the redefinition of religion, including social, educational and psychological dimensions, that creates tensions. This is the real stake. The sphere of intervention on the paths of rehabilitation and re-education becomes a field of competition. It is played out between the prison bureaucracies, the institutions of official Islam, born as an instrument of government of the regime but capable of obtaining wide margins of autonomy, and the Islamic associations. In recent years, this confrontation has seen the dominant claim to self-sufficiency of the prison competency system against a highly differentiated set of religious institutions and movements. The latter are, for the most part, lacking in professional expertise and 'theological' repertoire in relation to prison.

But, above all, they are caught up in political games in which the potential seen in the ‘sources’ is dissolved. After a season of experiments (on the part of Islamist associations, but especially the Ministry of Religious Affairs), which the author has tried to reconstruct in this contribution, in the Tunisian context, the dispositif of religious intervention in the prison space (the wa‘d and the irchād) fundamentally encountered a lot of resistance and failed to consolidate, as happened in other Muslim countries.

The field produced by the political confrontation between secular perspectives and political Islam (whose competitions on the issue of rehabilitation reproduce the profile on the scene of the prison institution) remains in the background, still open and more influential than ever on the specificities of the prison.

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