



## CONTENDING RELIGIONS, IDENTITIES AND SPACE

MACERATA, NOVEMBER 12 -13, 2015

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**PAPER'S TITLE:** ANTI-ISLAMISTS IN THE WAKE OF ISLAMIC TRADITION: THE *IDEOSCAPE* OF THE TUNISIAN LEFT

**ABSTRACT:** In the aftermath of the Tunisian uprising, Leftist militants have been defined as *secular fundamentalists* for their staunch opposition to the Islamist and Salafi movements. The role of Islam and the *shari'a* in the public sphere has been harshly disputed and peaceful coexistence put at risk. The cultural cleavage so often evoked by media and analysts actually conceals the nuanced and varied approach to Islam.

This paper aims to delve into the current conflict from a historical viewpoint by investigating Tunisian secularist activism. In the Muslim world, a debate on Islam and Marxism thrived in the 1950s and 1960s and in the same period an ideological tendency aiming to conciliate Islam and Socialism came to the surface. Such ideas echoed in Tunisia, notably during the revisionist period of the 1980s.

The Tunisian Left will be situated within this ideological landscape by shedding light on its *specificity*. Attention will be given to its relationship with the reformist and popular tradition, and to convergences with the Islamist movement (notably the Islamist Left). Even if involved in international networks and campaigns, Leftist militants in Tunisia have been deeply rooted in (and concerned by) the national context, its cultural features and internal challenges. Nonetheless, they remained a minor force perceived as exogenous.

This presentation will focus on the ideological and practical patterns of the Tunisian Communists under Bourghiba's regime (1956-1987). President Habib Bourghiba fostered secularist politics that meant to control religious institutions and make modern citizens of Tunisian people. The Communists' approach to this authoritarian version of secularism will be also examined so as to highlight its multiple facets in the Tunisian environment. Atheism and anticonservatism coexisted within the Communist Party along with more accommodating stances.

Sources from public and private archives (Archives de la Seine-Saint Denis – Paris, Archives Habib Kazdaghli and Archives Jamil Hayder – Tunis) will be analysed, as well as memoirs, interviews, newspapers and reviews.

### **AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO AND ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

Daniela Melfa is Associate Professor of African History at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Catania. She specialised in North African History and in 2008 published her PhD dissertation on Italian wine growers in the Tunisian protectorate. Her research broadened to include European settlement in Tunisia with a focus upon missionary activities, gender roles and colonial subjects' agency. Currently she is investigating the political history of independent Tunisia, notably the ideology and activity of the Tunisian Communist Party. She is involved in international academic networks and in 2012 she spent a trimester as visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley.



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