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**The Islamists of the Arab World  
& the Palestinian Issue**  
in Light of the Arab Uprisings

مؤتمر  
**الإسلاميون في العالم العربي  
والقضية الفلسطينية**  
في ضوء التغيرات والثورات العربية

Working Paper

**Islamists in Tunisia and the Palestinian Issue**  
**(Al-Nahdah Party as a Model)**

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## Islamists in Tunisia and the Palestinian Issue (al-Nahdah Party as a model)

Riad al-Shu'aibi\*<sup>1</sup>

All praise be to Allah alone, and may His peace and blessings be upon His messenger our Prophet Muhammad, his family and his companions.

“Jerusalem is a verse in the Book; he who loses it loses the Book.”<sup>2</sup> This slogan carries a deep understanding of the Palestinian issue and its complexities, and also of the kind of action and efforts required to liberate it.

To be sure, the issue of the liberation of Palestine in our Islamic consciousness was never a mere slogan related to the right of peoples to self-determination, but is the central issue in the ideology and culture of the Islamist movement in Tunisia since its inception in the early 1970s. Yet the presence of the Palestinian issue in Tunisian political struggle dates back long before that, to the stances taken by Tunisian scholars who rejected the Balfour Declaration, and issued edicts making it a religious duty to fight to liberate Palestine. Even one of the most important leaders<sup>3</sup> of Tunisian armed resistance against French colonialism had not fired a single shot in Tunisia until after fighting against the Zionists in 1948.<sup>4</sup>

Following the UN resolution on the partition of Palestine on November 29/11/1947, Great Mosque of Al-Zaytuna and its branches declared a general strike, and called on merchants in the capital and cities in Tunisia to close their businesses. The students of al-Zaytuna also went on strike on 12/10/1947 until 4/12/1947.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Riad al-Shu'aibi, member of the Political Bureau of the Tunisian Renaissance Party (al-Nahdah)

<sup>2</sup> A slogan raised by Sheikh Rashid al-Ghannushi, to express the importance of Jerusalem in the conflict in the region.

<sup>3</sup>Lazhar Chraïti, who was executed by Bourguiba shortly after independence, something that France itself could not do in the days of direct colonization.

<sup>4</sup> Volunteering to fight on the part of the Tunisians was the noblest form of supporting the Palestinian people during the war of 1948. Volunteering was organized by various patriotic factions; the number of volunteers reached 2,230 in July 1948 (338 Tunisians were arrested by the colonial authorities). In a report by the French Resident-General Jean Mons, he wrote, “The first Tunisian-Libyan battalion was able to reach [Palestine] and fight against Zionist forces. The battles that took place in the first half of June led to the death of 11 Tunisian volunteers (report to French government dated 15/7/1948).

<sup>5</sup> On 3/12/1947, Sheikh Fadhel Ben Achour gave a lecture at al-Khaldunia titled “Palestine, the national homeland of the Arab World,” in which he explained the role played by Britain in the Arab-Zionist conflict. On December 4,

The French colonial authorities in Tunisia were concerned by the activities of the volunteers, particularly al-Sadeq al-Bsaiyyis, who was arrested by the French for raising money to help Palestinians without a permit, and was put on trial on 25/6/1948.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, mobilization for Palestine and taking part in the struggle to liberate it did not stop, and the Palestinian issue became a rallying cry for various political factions in the country. These factions competed among one another in solidarity with Palestine, out of their awareness of the significance of this issue and its being the common ground among the different and even divergent political and ideological trends, both internal and external, and also as one of the primary motives of the battle of freedom and dignity against corruption and tyranny.

As Sheikh Rashid al-Ghannushi says, taking up the defense of the Palestinian issue was the condition for people to hand over the leadership of the national movement in Tunisia to certain individuals, both before and after independence.<sup>7</sup> One of the most important tests of credibility in the eyes of the Tunisian people lies in the real stance on the Palestinian issue, whereas the adoption of this issue has strengthened political awareness among wide segments of the Tunisian elite.

Supporting the Palestinian issue determined the nature of the relationship between a given party with the authorities under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Indeed, the nature of the stance on this issue was a key factor in forging or severing ties with the ruling regime, in what was political polarization between two main camps in Tunisia: The camp of surrendering to foreign peace settlements and the will of major powers, and the camp of solidarity with core rights and clinging to them.

We saw the manifestations of this alignment throughout Tunisia's modern history, starting with the contradiction between Bourguiba's call for accepting the partition of Palestine, and the spreading awareness and culture of unity among the Tunisians that called for defending the rights of the Palestinians to reclaim their entire land.

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professors at al-Zaytuna along with Islamic organizations in Tunisia held a massive rally at the university's mosque, attended by three thousand people. During the rally, Sheikh al-Shadhili ibn al-Qadi called for armament, raising money, and recruiting men to carry out the holy duty in Arab Palestine, and attacked the Zionists.

<sup>6</sup>In his monthly report to the French Foreign Ministry, the Resident-General wrote, "The Zaytuna Mosque is primarily responsible for the tension in the country. The chargés at Zaytuna have created an explosive situation by raising money and recruiting volunteers throughout the country."

<sup>7</sup>This was mentioned in a speech by Rashid al-Ghannushi at the constituent conference of the Maghreb Coalition to Support the Mughrabi Gate in Tunis on 9/11/2012.

Then there were the official stances that were reluctant to support the 1973 war, when the popular conscience was entirely in support of the Arab and Muslim brethren in the battle for the liberation of the Sinai, and sent large numbers of Tunisian volunteers to take part in that war.

The same was true during the invasion of Lebanon. Tunisian blood mixed with Palestinian blood during the terrorist attack launched by the Israeli air force on the Hamam al-Shat area, one of the suburbs of the capital, as the best example of this Tunisian-Palestinian bond in life as in death.

At a time when the Tunisian people were fighting their battle against the tyranny of Bourguiba and calling for his downfall in 1987, the first Palestinian *Intifadah* was underway, perhaps as a kind of telepathic connection between the Tunisian and Palestinian peoples. When Ben Ali carried out his coup against Bourguiba, Israel was the first to welcome and even support this change, out of its belief that it would deny the Palestinian issue certain strategic support if the Islamist movement had taken power at the time.

Despite the brutal oppression, and the Ben Ali regime's clear involvement in the Israeli strategy in the Arab region, the participation of young Tunisian volunteers from various backgrounds in resistance operations did not stop, and many Tunisian martyrs fell in successive periods of time.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Israeli spies were able to infiltrate and spread in Tunisia during that period and within Ben Ali's apparatuses

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<sup>8</sup>This is a simple overview of some of the martyrs who fell in Palestine and south Lebanon:

- Milo bin Najeh, worker, who fell with his comrade Khaled al-Akrafi on 27/11/1987, while carrying out the famous glider operation, with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), led by Ahmad Jibril, against a camp of Israeli commandos.
- Umran bin al-Kilani al-Muqaddami, fell on 26/4/1988 in an attack in the Galilee Panhandle, in northern Palestine.
- Khalid bin Saleh al-Jalasi, worker, who fell on 28/9/1988 in a heroic operation in the Manara region of the upper Galilee in north Palestine, out of south Lebanon.
- Faisal al-Hashashi, student, who fell on 8/7/1993 after taking part in an attack against an Israeli patrol in the Aishiyyah area of south Lebanon near the border with Palestine.
- Sami Ben al-Taher al-Haj Ali, student, who fell on 19/1/1995. He was with Riad ben al-Hashemi ben Jama'ah and other comrades, and together they ambushed an Israeli convoy on the road between the Lebanese town of Taibeh and the Kibbutz Misgav-Am in occupied Palestine.
- Riad ben al-Hashemi ben Jama'ah, student, who fell on 19/1/1995 in an operation in the town of Taibeh.
- Kamal ben al-Saudi Badri, student, who fell on 27/1/1996, during an operation in the Srira region in the district of Jezzine, Lebanon
- Baleegh ben Muhammad Anwar al-Lajmi, student, who fell on 27/1/1996, while carrying out an attack in Srira, Jezzine.

at the most senior levels, in open collusion with the regime<sup>9</sup>. This led to the assassination of Palestinian resistance leader Abu Jihad. Israeli espionage, without a doubt, backed the Ben Ali regime in liquidating the Islamist movement over two decades, and we saw this clearly at many political junctures.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, those with Palestinian blood on their hands were the same party to shed the blood of free Tunisians. More than 150 martyrs fell, and 30 thousand activists were imprisoned, while nearly three thousand were exiled to fifty different countries around the world.

### **The Fundamentals in our Vision for the Palestinian Issue:<sup>11</sup>**

- The Palestinian issue is a just cause related to the liberation of the land from the Israeli settler-colonial occupation, the return of the refugees to their original homes, and restoring the sanctity of holy sites and religious symbols, both Muslim and Christian.
- The liberation of Palestinian lands is contingent upon the cultural rebirth of our Arab-Islamic nation, a necessary condition to achieve it. Jerusalem, with its religious and historical symbolism, must not be compromised. Otherwise, the nation would be compromising a major part of its religion and dignity.
- The Palestinian issue involves historical and religious rights for the Islamic nation in general. This nation is responsible for demanding these rights, and is obliged to provide the necessary support to any efforts seeking to restore them.
- The Palestinian issue is on the list of urgent priorities for any project for renaissance, and an important guide of the strategy of the Islamist movement.

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<sup>9</sup> The director general of national security and other officials were found to be collaborating with Israel. Although the suspects wanted a public trial in which they intended to reveal names, reportedly including Leila Ben Ali, the president's wife, a deal was reached with them despite the defense's protests, and a secret trial was held in return for mitigated sentences that did not exceed three years in prison.

<sup>10</sup> The Ben Ali regime opened an office to manage joint interests between Tunisia and Israel. Ben Ali also frequently met with the leaders of Israeli lobbies in the world, whenever he came under political and human rights pressure, to seek their support.

<sup>11</sup>In the final statement of the ninth conference of the al-Nahdah Movement, item 15 mentioned: "Al-Nahdah considers the Palestinian issue to be the central cause of the nation, and stands strongly on the side of the Palestinian people in its struggle for the liberation of its land, and criminalizes normalization with the Zionist entity."

- The right of the Palestinian people to liberate its land is guaranteed by all humanitarian considerations, principles, and recognized international charters, including the right to resist using all means at its disposal.

### **The Fundamentals in our Vision From a Cultural Standpoint:**

Long before the crusades and the Israeli settler-colonial occupation of Palestine, the Quran stressed vehemently the importance, status, and sanctity of these regions. The Quranic text varied from narrating history and drawing attention to the lessons that must be learned from it, references to the religious status of Jerusalem and the areas surrounding it, and the future of the conflict over this region.

Many verses of the Quran reference Jerusalem, either because it was the first Qiblah of the Muslims, or for its connection to events that changed the face of humanity, and its connection to many prophets and messengers, or also to underscore the symbolic and even geostrategic importance of Jerusalem as will be explained below.

Allah (SWT) said in the Quran:

- ❖ *Glory to (Allah) Who did take His servant for Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless— in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things). (al-Isra': 1)*

In the interpretation of the Quran, it has been mentioned that this verse references Iilyaa, or Jerusalem, where Prophet Muhammad led the prophets in prayer.

- ❖ *But We delivered him and (his nephew) Lut (and directed them) to the land which We have blessed for the nations. (al-Anbiya':71)*

In Abu Dharr al-Ghifari's narration, he said: I said: O Messenger of Allah, which mosque was first built on the Earth? The Prophet (PBUH) said, "Al-Masjid al-Haram and then Al-Masjid al-Aqsa;" I said: How much time elapsed between them? He said: "Fourty years." This was before Moses

(PBUH) was sent forth by Allah. Indeed, Abraham (PBUH), just like he built with Ismail (PBUH) the foundations of Masjid al-Haram, was the one who chose the location of Masjid al-Aqsa on the instructions of Allah (SWT). Allah said, “*Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian, but he was true in faith and bowed his will to Allah's (Which is Islam) and he joined not gods with Allah*” (*Al ‘Imran: 67*)

In the Hadith Sahih, it is mentioned that “Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) is the land of *Mahshar* –congregation – and *Manshar* – resurrection,” and also “The heart of Dar al-Islam is in al-Sham.”

The texts that explain the religious and historical significance of Jerusalem are more than one can count, and the city’s value among all Muslims, throughout their history, is the best proof of the cultural significance of this region. It has always been the focal point for Muslims, scholars, and the faithful, and there is no doubt that the deed of Caliph ‘Umar bin al-Khattab, who made many lands in Palestine and the Levant an endowment for the whole Muslim nation, played a great role in the Muslims’ attachment to this land, where no Muslim is a stranger and to which every Muslim has an established historical right

The Bilad al-Sham, then, in general, and Jerusalem and Palestine in particular, as the heart of this region, have an important cultural dimension in the history of the Muslims and their future, as established in scriptures. Allah has even willed it that some of the signs of the Day of Judgment would emerge in this region.<sup>12</sup>

If we examine Islamic history, we will find that Jerusalem and Bilad al-Sham in general are pivotal in many historical milestones, and have largely determined the course of this history. We can see how international relations become tenser and sharper the closer we get to this region, as though the most important international issues gather and clash here at the entrances of Jerusalem, and then retreat in despair, only because the Muslim civilization prevents any final normalization with injustice or surrender to the will of the occupiers.

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<sup>12</sup> The Prophet (PBUH) said, “The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews, when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Muslims, O ‘Abdullah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.”

## **The Fundamentals in our Vision from a Strategic Standpoint:**

The strategic character of a given region is determined by several factors, particularly history and geography, which are the same factors that determine our vision of the Palestinian issue:

- **Historically:** The battle for the control of Palestine is nothing new in the history of the region. If modern wars in particular erupt over economic, security, ethnic, or nationalistic reasons, the battle for Palestine was not subject to these considerations at all. Even the colonial powers, in the Sykes-Picot Accord, agreed to make Palestine an internationally administered area not controlled by any particular power. But Britain reneged on this accord later on.

This land witnessed some of the most important historical, religious, and political events. This began with the Israelites, about whom Allah (SWT) said, *“And We gave (Clear) Warning to the Children of Israel in the Book, that twice would they do mischief on the earth and be elated with mighty arrogance (and twice would they be punished)! (4) When the first of the warnings came to pass, We sent against you Our servants given to terrible warfare: They entered the very inmost parts of your homes; and it was a warning (completely) fulfilled.”*(al-Isra’:4-5).

After the Romans deviated from their religion, and failed to preserve the Bible, Allah permitted the Muslims to conquer Jerusalem. ‘Umar bin al-Khattab thus entered the city, ushering in the Islamic era. But when the Muslims grew weak, and their power declined, the crusades took place, though they ultimately culminated with the victory of the Muslims once more. Finally, the refusal of Sultan ‘Abdul Hamid to compromise this blessed land did not prevent the usurpation of Palestine by the Israeli movement, with the full support of the major powers.

- **Geopolitical significance:** Palestine is located at the intersection of three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), and at a strategic juncture between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. This has made it the focus of many conflicts, particularly between the Muslims on the one hand, and the Christian Europeans on the other, and then after them with the Zionist



movement. The major powers' strong determination to maintain their dominance on the region through the Zionist instrument has to do with their keenness on maintaining superiority against the entire Arab region, and preventing the latter from restoring its cultural role.

Control of the region for various major powers has represented a huge symbolic and strategic importance. For this reason, the Palestinian issue is one of the most important axes of international relations, and is at the heart of the battle for freedom and dignity for our Islamic nation.

### **The Fundamentals in our Vision from a Humanitarian and Legal Standpoint:**

Mr. Munir Shafiq believes correctly that the Palestinian issue is outside traditional classifications of liberation causes, and that there is a huge difference between Palestine's situation and that of other colonized countries or those that suffer from racial discrimination. Yet despite the huge injustice visited on the Palestinian issue, many international resolutions expressed deep humanitarian sympathy with the rights of the Palestinian people, despite all pressure exerted by the major powers in favor of Israel.

The Balfour Declaration, which was offered by Britain to the Zionist movement, was the biggest act of injustice against the Palestinian people. Not even that, but the declaration was also included as part of the League of Nations' resolution placing Palestine under Britain's control in the mandate regime. The declaration pledges to create a national homeland for the Jews on Palestinian land.

However, all this did not dissuade the Palestinians from rejecting and resisting this resolution, through protests and riots, and then revolutions, most notably the Ezzedeen al-Qassam armed uprising in 1935 and the Revolution of 1936. From the outset, the Islamic nation was aware of the seriousness of the British decision. For this reason, many efforts were launched to resist it, and the Palestinian situation was seen as separate and distinct from all other colonized Arab and Islamic regions.

As a result of internal and external influences, the United States joined the Zionist strategy. In 1944, the US Congress issued a bill encouraging unrestricted

immigration and the establishment of a Jewish state. After the UN resolution on the partition of Palestine was passed in 1947, dividing it into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, and placing Jerusalem under international administration, the Zionist movement in 1948 declared the state of Israel, and began strengthening its army, and confiscating the lands of the Palestinians and expelling them.

Despite the many wars witnessed by the region starting with the war of 1948, and then 1956, 1967, the war of attrition, the 1973 war, the various resistance attacks around the world, and resistance out of south Lebanon, none of the Palestinian rights have been restored so far. Worse still, in many stages of the conflict, Israel was able to expand at the expense of Arab territory, and expel more Palestinians from their land. We had to wait until the end of the 1980s for Israel to start to contract, under pressure from successive *Intifadahs*, and then with the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

After nearly eight decades of the struggle, the demands of the Palestinian issue remain legitimate as ever, especially as concerns the right of the Palestinian people to liberate their land and expel the Israelis, and rule their historical homeland away from any foreign tutelage, as well as the right of the Palestinians to return to their original homes and receive reparations for material and moral damages. Furthermore, the Israeli violations of the rights of the Palestinian people require holding the perpetrators accountable and compensating the victims.

### **The Palestinian Issue in Light of the Changes Brought about by the Arab Spring:**

The successive uprisings of the Arab peoples were the best response to the approaches that divided Arab issues, either by country or by the nature of these issues. To be sure, the masses that came out calling for the downfall of tyrannical regimes were at the same time chanting “the people want the liberation of Palestine,” “the people want to end foreign tutelage,” and “the people want to live in dignity.” This meant that political, economic, and country-specific issues are intimately linked, as well as pan-Arab issues. Indeed, the final statement of the ninth conference of al-Nahdah party states:

“The Arab anger which moved the Arab revolutions is a deep anger, where feelings of cultural injustice, political oppression, and economic marginalization intermix, while the nation-states that emerged after independence have depleted the last drop of their already questionably legitimacies.”

Indeed, the Arab peoples for long have considered the official Arab regimes to be traitors to the national Arab issues, led by the Palestinian issue. And certainly, one of the primary motives behind the wrath incurred by the peoples against their rulers has to do with the regimes’ treasonous and unpopular stances in accepting unjust settlement, normalization, and shunning resistance.

In light of the dialectical relationship between the Palestinian issue and the rest of Arab issues, a political view emerged which believes that achieving freedom and dignity for the Arab peoples would be the first step towards the liberation of Palestine. In truth, the Arab uprisings would not have succeeded in toppling tyranny and corruption, were it not for the steadfastness of the Palestinian issue in withstanding all attempts for imposing an unjust peace settlement. For one thing, the steadfastness of the Palestinians and their resistance implanted hope in the countries that make up the nation and motivated efforts towards bringing about change.

At the psychological level, it is not easy to explain the dialectical relationship between the Palestinian issue and the rest of the Arab issues. However, whatever this explanation may turn out to be, all facts on the ground reaffirm the concomitance among all Arab issues, be they political, economic, social, or cultural, and whether they are domestic or external.

In general, we may say that the challenge to build capabilities and states by fulfilling demands for freedom and dignity are inseparable from the national issue represented by the liberation of Palestine, and the independence of sovereign decisions by the new Arab political regime.

The presence of Resistance symbols and its leaders in Tunisia after the revolution<sup>13</sup>, and the growing number of groups supporting resistance, is but an

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<sup>13</sup>Especially Khalid Mish‘al, head of Hamas’s politburo, and Isma‘il Haniyyah, Palestinian prime minister.

expression of this link between the liberation of the Arab peoples and a strong role in supporting the Palestinian issue.<sup>14</sup>

The Tunisian official position adopted by the government during the recent assault on Gaza Strip was clear and direct in its commitment to backing the Palestinian brethren. A ministerial delegation led by the Foreign Minister, a representative of the President, and a number of ministers visited Gaza under fire, and expressed the Tunisian stance which stated that the policies of Israeli aggression that relied on the silence of the official Arab regime must be wary now that the Arab revolutions brought new governments that will not hesitate to help the Palestinian people against aggression.

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<sup>14</sup>Another example of this is the pro-Palestinian festivals and protests often seen in Tunisia, such as the Palestinian prisoners' conference hosted by Tunis with official government sponsorship.