Coloring Outside the Lines of the Nation.
An Iconological Analysis of the Tunisian Revolution

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The Tunisian revolution not only liberated the country of its tenacious autocratic ruler, it also impacted, in a profound way, the imagination of prevailing political subjectivities. After Ben Ali fled the country, unsettled post-colonial tensions over the delineation of these changing subjectivities re-emerged, coloring outside the lines of the nation. The present paper analyzes this contentious process of becoming through an iconological analysis of the entangled dynamics of re-imagination that the national flag underwent during the Tunisian revolution, starting from the liberation phase in December 2010, through the constitutional phase and the promulgation of the new constitution in 2014, until the inauguration of the National Flag Square in March 2017. The present iconological analysis is not only paradoxically witness to the very limitation of the power of icons to engender dignified relationalities within a given nation, but is also witness to the slow closure of the revolutionary space and the gradual blockage of revolutionary processes of subject formation. This blockage was productive for the precarious restoration of national unity and state prestige necessary for the completion of the new constitution, but less for the demands for liberty, social justice and dignity so central to the revolution.

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The colors and forms of subjectivity

Reflected in the glass case of a popcorn machine during the tumultuous occupation of the Kasbah square in February 2011, the image of a fluttering national banner poetically suggests the irreversibility of subject formation, popping like corn during the revolution. The layered video, shot by visual artist Halim Karabibene, reminds us of how the unified Tunisian masses regained a sense of collective agency through the creative reappropriation of the quintessential icon of the nation, the Tunisian flag (see fig.1).

For decades the Tunisian population was depicted, not only externally by an Orientalist gaze, but also by an internalized inferiority complex, as a homogeneous, passive and apolitical mass under the control of a resilient autocratic regime. Not only through the enunciation of *the people* (Marzouki "People to Citizens"; De Smet "Dialectical Pedagogy"; Zemni "Revolution"), but also through the creative reappropriation and diversion of the rallying image of the nation, the local revolt in the marginalized interior and south of the country gradually shifted into a national insurrection. Consequently, the masses, unified under the reclaimed national banner, not only succeeded in their spontaneous effort to expel their

Figure 1: "The Popcorn Revolution". Karabibene, Tunisia 2011.

tyrant, but also provoked an irreversible disruption to how the Tunisian population was globally conceived and how it conceived itself. New political subjectivities emerged and existing ones fundamentally changed.

After the ousting of president Zine el-'Abidine Ben 'Ali, however, the singular revolutionary body fragmented as quickly as it was formed in the first place. Generational, regional and cultural divisions came to the surface (Marzouki "People to Citizens"), gendered, ideological and class tensions materialized (Hasso and Salime *Freedom without Permission*), and – as I will point out – unsettled postcolonial tensions over the delineation of these changing subjectivities re-emerged.

The process of subversion and re-imagination of the colors and forms of the national flag intensified. Not only artists and (Islamist) activists, but the population in all its diversity, in the informal as well as in the more formal parts of civil society, engaged in a – sometimes violent – iconological battlefield over the symbolic delineation of the new polis that they were all respectively striving for. Though the white crescent and five pointed star of the flag pictorially refer to the nation's Islamic history, when Tunis was an administrative division of the Ottoman Caliphate, and mark its pan-Islamic adherence (Wills *Complete Flags*), the flag was most fundamentally questioned by the re-emergence of strongly affirmed Islamist subjectivities. As most movements, parties and civil society organizations shared a certain patriotism (Zemni, "Revolution" 141), the reinstatement of the officially defined proportions and colors of the national symbol facilitated a historical compromise between different – sometimes conflicting – political demands. Certainly after the proclamation of a new constitution in 2014, the flag ceased to be re-imagined. The unaddressed historical tensions that resurfaced after the expulsion of the autocratic ruler were swept under the rug.

The Tunisian revolution was leaderless. It was not led by a highly politicized and organized group nor by a party with a clear-cut ideology (Allal "Trajectoires 'Révolutionnaires'"; LeVine "Theorizing Revolutionary"). In the light of what Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* extensively conceptualized as the spontaneity of liberation struggle, it is understandable that most scholars regarded political categories such as *leftist, secularist* or *Islamist* obsolete (Levine, "Theorizing Revolutionary"). However, directly after "the Tunisian people raised their star" (Dakhlia "Tunisie"), academics delineated a new political subjectivity characterized by a certain reflexivity that goes beyond expected neoliberal individualism or Islamist collectivism (Hanafi "The Arab Revolutions"): a democratic subjectivity (Sadiki "Search for Citizenship") marked by a new sense of pragmatic, leaderless patriotism (Bayhem "Arab Revolutions") that leaves any Islamic or Islamist imaginary behind (Challand "The Counter-Power"). Nonetheless, a lack of stable reference to designate new emerging subjectivities during the initial phase of the revolution (LeVine "Theorizing Revolutionary"), make these interpretations look too precipitous. De Smet sharply argued that "there was no protagonist simply waiting behind the curtains of his-

tory only to make his scripted appearance at the scene of revolution" (26). Subjectivities are indeed spontaneously re-imagined and re-invented during the revolutionary struggle itself. The process of re-imagination the national flag underwent during the Tunisian Revolution is evidence of these changing subjectivities. Moreover, the revolution did not stop after Ben 'Ali and his government were overthrown. Nor did the post-revolutionary phase start after his ousting. Following Hannah Arendt's analysis *On Revolution* (Zemni "The Extraordinary Politics"; "Revolution"), the overthrow of the government can be regarded as merely the first phase of liberation. After this first phase a new political order had to be created. The constitutive phase then discloses the struggle of all the fragmented, pluralistic and conflicting forces that made up the unified people in the phase of liberation. It is in the light of this constitutive phase that some academics openly accused Islamist parties and groups of attempting to *hijack* and *steal* the revolution (Omri "Perils of Identity"). Others saw it as a continuation of unresolved historical questions over identity and symbolic meanings related to how the nation understands itself, that not only included Islamists, but society as a whole (Zemni "The Extraordinary Politics"; McCarthy

"Tunisian Uprising"). If the post-revolutionary phase thus only started with the promulgation of the new constitution, we will indeed have to include in our analysis the struggle by all the different political actors engaged in a battle for a new collective political subjectivity, through the contestation of the historic delineation of the national flag.

From a grounded iconological analysis of the Tunisian flag, emerging subjectivities will be spelled out through the entangled process of re-imagination of the national flag, starting from the liberation phase in 2010, through the constitutional phase and the promulgation of the new constitution in 2014, until the inauguration of the National Flag Square in March 2017. The dynamics of difference or alterity at the core of every iconological struggle makes it the perfect site to scrutinize the processes of subject formation and go beyond prevailing divisions and mutual exclusivities in the building of this new polis that the revolution is striving for (Kathib *Image Politics*). The Tunisian Revolution and the subjectivities emerging out of the revolution have hitherto too often been read teleologically instead of genealogically, missing not only the histories but also the presents these histories produce (LeVine "Theorizing

Revolutionary"). To better grasp the power mechanisms behind these emergences, a post-colonial perspective can provide proper insights (Mullin "Tunisian Uprising"). Present in the revolutionary dynamics, often described as a second independence, postcolonial fault-lines are too often overlooked when considering how new political subjects emerge or existing ones fundamentally change throughout revolutionary dynamics (De Smet "Dialectical Pedagogy").

The intricate connection between the re-imagination of the national flag and the formation of new subjectivities during the Tunisian revolution are analyzed taking into account possible pitfalls of national consciousness as elaborated by Frantz Fanon. Processes of liberation fundamentally transform prevailing subjectivities, as they forcefully pierce interiorized forms of depreciated self-understanding. Subject (trans-)formations are not the product of supernatural powers, but born out of revolutionary processes directed to liberated forms of self-understanding. As "men [*sic*] change at the same time that they change the world", struggle "remodels the consciousness that man [*sic*] has of himself, and of his former dominators or of the world, at last within his reach" (Fanon, *Dying Colonialism* 30). It is in this national

process of *becoming* that the seeds of new dignified subjectivities are located. This process is essential for our analysis, as it "renews the symbols, the myths, the beliefs, the emotional responsiveness of the people" (Fanon 30). We will thus analyze this process of becoming through an iconological analysis of the dynamics of re-imagination that the national flag underwent during the Tunisian revolution.

However, Fanon extensively warns of possible pitfalls for national consciousness. "Instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people", it can become nothing more than an "empty shell" confined in a mimetical sterile formalism, doomed to become a caricature of itself (*Wretched of the Earth* 148). Consequently, "the masses […] do not manage, in spite of public holidays and flags, new and brightly colored though they may be, to convince themselves that anything has really changed" (169). If it does not want to become a caricature of itself, mystified by mere formalism, nationalism, understood as the consciousness of the spontaneity of liberation struggle, has to be explicitly dissolved into a dignifying project that, through a conscious and sovereign subjectivity, answers concrete economic and social needs. When this transformation

happens, nationalist symbols would become superfluous as "the nation deserts these brightly lit, empty shells and takes shelter in the country, where it is given life and dynamic power" (204). In such a dignified humanist regime, "the living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people" as "it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women" (204). In Tunisia, the liberation was indeed imbued with a unifying national consciousness facilitated by the flag. However, the nationalist colors have not yet dissolved into a dignifying societal project that tackles the concrete economic and social needs that motivated the initial movement. On the contrary, youth unemployment seems even to increase.[1] In the meantime, the official national flag was massively reproduced, and the bigger the better, instigating a caricatural national pride as an answer to the spontaneous proliferation of the Black Standard and different symbolic actions of flag desecration.

The pervading reproduction and ubiquity of the gradually reinstated banner in its official pictorial structure since the summer of 2013, and certainly since the promulgation of the new constitution in 2014, are – as we will argue – not only paradoxically witness to the very limitation of the

power of icons to engender dignified relationalities within a given nation, but are also witness to the slow closure of the revolutionary space and the gradual blockage of revolutionary processes of subject formation. This blockage was productive for the precarious restoration of national unity and state prestige necessary for the completion of the new constitution, but less for the demands for liberty, social justice and dignity so central to the revolution.

An iconological analysis of the national flag

Building upon the nation's colors and forms, the Ben 'Ali regime kept up an exceptional image of itself, creating a "Tunisian fiction" (Hibou *Force de l'Obéissance*). This constructed fiction, constituted by an entangled web of interconnected mythologies, obfuscated a reality of severe economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation of traditional morals and religious references (Cavatorta and Haugbølle "End of Authoritarian"). The revolution, however, fiercely punctured the official image of the Tunisian exception and fundamentally transformed the prevailing image of Tunisia and its underlying subjectivities, as through the reclamation of the right to look at these – until recently hidden – eco-

nomic and political problems, new subjectivities are formed (Mirzoeff "Right to Look"). Visibility was the strength of the revolutionary movement, as it turned the structure of the surveillance state against itself (Tripp "Art, Power"). In the storm of images that accompanied the revolution, an "iconography of anonymity" could indeed be ascertained, as the ubiquitous portrait of the autocratic leader was massively destroyed, as observed by W.J.T. Mitchell ("Image, Space" 9). However, "the image that promised to become a monument" was not the image of empty space, but the lively processes of reversal, appropriation and rejection of the national flag, at least in the Tunisian context. For Eriksen and Jenkins in *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America*, a flag is a condensed symbol that imagines cohesion and solidarity in a given nation-state. Through its multi-vocality it can efficiently imagine the unity of complex and heterogeneous societies, as it encompasses a diversity of possible interpretations. At the same time it is always historically rooted in a certain cultural and political past and associated with specific interests, and thus it categorically excludes certain minorities. However, the flag can undergo processes of pictorial transformation over time. The more multi-vocal a flag, the lower its reductionist, essentialist, conflictual or

even murderous potentialities in concrete political situations. Hence, it is the simultaneous unifying and dividing character of the flag that makes it an iconological site and thus a barometer of (potential) conflicts. Even though it is broadly assumed to be "the most revered among symbols, icons and markers associated with nation and nationalism in [the] twentieth-century" (Jha, *Reverence, Resistance* 2), conflicts over the delineation of a given nation can be scrutinized by analyzing the way the flag is received in a given society.

The spontaneity of the revolutionary process demands empirically grounded methodologies to capture the dissemination and contention of power and agency to thoroughly understand the struggle over the formation of political subjectivities (LeVine "Theorizing Revolutionary"). As suggested by Lina Khatib in *Image Politics*, the iconological struggle over presence and visibility through competing images took center stage during the revolution. The image, as a "construct infused with meanings, attributes and projected perceptions", was invested by different actors as a key site of political struggle, not only for the construction of social and political realities, but also for the legitimation of emerging subjectivities (Khatib 2-3). Following the pictorial turn intro-

duced by W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, this analysis proposes to contribute to a fundamental and critical understanding of images in their own right, beyond their presupposed semiotic and linguistic structure. By delving into the dynamic pictorial structure of the national flag and the proliferation of its diversion and subversion through different online and offline media by different revolutionary protagonists, I hope to contribute to the ongoing analytical-methodological inquiry of the political productivity of mass-mediated icons (Haugbølle and Kuzmanovic "New Sociology").

Unresolved historical questions

Struck by an image of the national flag bending over a revolting city with a bleeding eye in its red center in the front-page of a journal, Hela Béji's dream of a new humanism collapsed. This image of profound discontent was not related to the latest revolution, but to the historical *Black Thursday* of 1978, when the government killed about 200 protesters during the first general strike since independence. Tunisia fell into what Béji calls in her work *Désenchantement National: Essai sur la Décolonisation* "national disenchantment". Following independence, the

government reinforced a process of *Tunisification*, to radiate a strong national subjectivity that, unlike during colonial times, gained the support of the totality of the population, beyond pre-nationalist pluralistic clan and tribal collectivities (Anderson *Social Transformation*; Sadiki "Search for Citizenship"). *Tunisian-ness* had to be invented to oppose colonial rule (Sadiki "Search for Citizenship"). Since 1922, the then still-subversive image of the flag was proudly reclaimed and brandished by the liberation movement formed around the new militant nationalist *Destour* movement (Lewis *Divided Rule*), pictorially relating to an oppositional subjectivity grounded in Islamic terms. With the successful rise of the *Neo-Destour*, however, these terms were slowly renegotiated in the direction of more territorially oriented and national rather than religious belongings (Sadiki "Search for Citizenship"). Illustrative in this light is the mythical story of actress Habiba Msika causing a scandal in 1928 during the première of *The Martyrs of Liberty*, as she got arrested by the colonial authorities who prohibited the play after she wrapped herself in the Tunisian flag and chanted slogans of liberation. With independence, the French flag, which was officially hoisted during the proclamation of the occupation in 1881 at the Kasbah in Tunis,

was replaced (Cattedra "Où est la Kasbah?"). The Tunisian flag initially visualized the national process of subject formation, from an interiorized inferiority as colonial object, to the Tunisian people as subject of its own history. After independence, however, divisions within the *Neo-Destour* came to the surface. Its Arab Nationalist stream was violently marginalized, together with the elimination of its leader Salah Ben Youssef in 1961. The Bourguibist stream reinforced its nationalist ideology but took a secular turn in the imagination of the nation, mimicking Western modernization (Sadiki). As the regime moved towards authoritarianism and the socialist experiment of the 1960s was abandoned, the masses were confronted with the alienating and oppressive nature of the ideals of the nation-state turned authoritarian (Béji *Désenchantement National*). Moreover, efforts of national unification and homogenization hegemonized and singularized in an exclusive way the political landscape, precluding political dissidence in general, but especially Islamist subjectivities (Sadiki "The Search for Citizenship"). Behind the façade of the homogeneous nation, the regional marginalization of the interior and south of the country that originated in the colonial era, and the class division this entailed, remained unaddressed and

were consolidated by the post-colonial regime (Mullin "Tunisian Uprising"). The national flag was hollowed and reduced to the background of the portrait of a long expired authoritarian and patrimonial leader. Nonetheless, the crescent and star survived the Bourguiba era. It even underwent a short revival, as it was embraced by the newly instated Ben 'Ali regime. The flag, however, was quickly seized by the regime and soon no longer reflected national belonging, but association with the ruling party (Bouzouita "Coulisses de la Revolution"). As the coercive character of the state was further legitimized through a sustained Islamist threat (Sadiki "The Search for Citizenship"), the colors of the nation were further hollowed-out as an essential and non-negotiable element in the repertoire of performance of regime adherence. In 1999 the national flag's pictorial structure was officially defined at the level of the law, further elaborating the 4*th* article of the Republican Constitution of 1959. To breathe life into the captured flag, the Ministry of National Defense published a collective book entirely dedicated to the national flag in June 2006, attempting to infuse the national symbol with pre-Islamic historical legitimacy. The process of national disenchantment rapidly intensified under Ben 'Ali, leaving only a "façade of national uniformity" (Dakhli "Tunisian

National Interest" 90), an empty shell hiding state corruption and the continued marginalization of Tunisia's peripheries.

Re-appropriating the national colors
Despite its extensive use as an exclusive symbol of power during the successive authoritarian regimes, the revolutionary masses in 2011 reappropriated the national flag together with its moral and political legitimacy, facilitating a unification and nationalization of the protest (Bouzouita "Coulisses de la Révolution"; Hawkins "Teargas, Flags"). The national symbol still floated in the streets as a symbol of power during the initial locally dispersed clashes between the mobilized youth and security forces in the interior and south of the country. The massive diversion of the flag used as profile pictures on social media, constructed a virtual representation of a united people that preceded its physical unification. It was only when the masses felt that together they could topple the president that the flag was also physically reappropriated and waved offline. During the initial liberation, virtually subverted flags formally mourned the sacrifice of the martyrs. Once Ben 'Ali fled, however, a celebratory and embodied aesthetic emphasized the pride and hope of a successful revolution on- and offline. The reappro-

priation of the rallying image of the national flag by the struggling population not only facilitated their unification, but also punctured the idealized image of the Tunisian exception, rendering visible the state of corruption and intensified marginalization outside the capital and coastal regions.

After Ben 'Ali was toppled, revolutionary demands to overthrow the government still in place were pushed by disenfranchised youth who had traveled from the interior and the south to the capital and occupied the Kasbah square, where the Prime Minister and his government hold office. Through the Freedom Caravan and the occupation of the Kasbah, the masses rediscovered an oppressed part of the national self (Saidi "Traveling"). The reappropriated national banner was quintessential in the performed occupation of the square, not only as a cape in the struggle against a persisting government, but also as a blanket covering historical regional, class and political divisions. The flag altogether incorporated the subjectivities previously overshadowed in what Fanon calls a "zone of nonbeing" (*Black Skin* 2). Diverse subjectivities underlying the feelings of injustice related to the access to land in the interior-south, the extraction of natural resources in the min-

ing regions, the repression of informal local economies at the border with Libya, and the corruption in the urban coastal centers and the capital were unified at the Kasbah (Zemni "Revolution"). Under the national banner, those inhabiting this zone of non-being reclaimed their sovereign right to be.

However, not everyone cheered the arrival of the Freedom Caravan. A call for a return to *normality* was voiced during manifestations at the Kobbah in Al Menzah, echoing the will of the interim government of National Unity, gathering against what they considered a radical minority that would destabilize the country's economy and security. They demanded clear leadership in the name of a *silent majority*, also identifying in patriotic terms, for the good of the Tunisian nation (Chennaoui "Kasbah"; Zemni "Extraordinary Politics"). Though both the Kasbah and Kobbah protesters acted under the same national banner, conflicting subjectivities were at stake (Zemni "Revolution"). After the fall of the interim government of National Unity, the occupation of the Kasbah made way for a collective but bumpy journey to the country's first free elections. From the moment street politics were translated to new official political structures and institutions, the revolutionary space closed

down and the formation of revolutionary subjectivities was challenged and – as we will see – sometimes even blocked from the political game (LeVine "Theorizing Revolutionary").

National Re-imagination

The debates in the elected National Constitutional Assembly and the newly appointed transition government were pushed forth by three contentious phases of national re-imagination. In a first phase, the national flag underwent a wave of desecration and the Black Standard gained more and more visibility. In a second phase, the national flag was revitalized as the country mourned its first political killings. Finally, the flag was massively waved in front of the Bardo square to demand, in vain, the dissolution of the constitutional assembly.
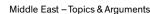
It all started at Manouba University when, during protests, an activist climbed up the roof of the janitor's building and, thanks to another student, in vain tried to replace the Tunisian flag with the Black Standard.[2] The incident rapidly grew from a local student opposition to a nationwide political question (Le Pape "Peut-on Convertir"), and was but the first in a series of actions questioning the outline of the nation and out-loud "recalling the caliphate" (Sayyid,

Recalling the Caliphate 186). More Salafi-oriented Islamist groups settled in different places in Tunisia's peripheries and hoisted the black flag. Under the impulse of the later-outlawed Salafi-jihadist movement *Anṣār al-Sharīʿa*, Islamist symbols were adopted and ostensibly waved during different actions and mobilizations (Merone "Social Contention"). When, after the diffusion of the film *Innocence of Muslims* in September 2012, the American Embassy was attacked by Salafi activists, they replaced the American flag with the Black Standard. The pinnacle of this phase of flag desecration was the mobilization during the Holy Koran Day, proclaimed by the Minister of Religious Affairs Noureddine El Khademi of the *an-Nahḍa* party to protest against ongoing profanations of the Koran. Thousands of Islamist activists gathered on the newly renamed *January 14 Square* demanding the implementation of the *Sharīʿa*, while seven of the best trained protesters waved their black banner on the highest point of the clock tower. The *Al-Amen* party suggested as a compromise in the Constitutive Assembly to add the calligraphic inscription of the Shahada to the national flag, to no avail. To counterbalance the ongoing phase of desecration, the transitional government packed the central clock

tower with the national flag on the second and third anniversary of the revolution.

A second phase of national re-imagination started with the murder of the leading member of the Popular Front, Chokri Belaïd. His funeral provoked a national mobilization, unseen since the days of the Kasbah. The people reused the banner as a blanket to cover national mourning. In response to the French Minister of the Interior, who linked the assassination to the rise of Islamic fascism, the French flag was ostentatiously burned. The pro-*an-Nahḍa* demonstrations following the assassination were not homogenous red and white, but also colored blue, red and white, referring to the colors of the party. The black standards were also present, engendering further suspicion with the opposition. To strengthen the support of the army in the escalating fights with jihadist cells, the government hoisted a giant national flag on top of Mount Chaâmbi. Finally, during the national celebrations for Women's Day and the anniversary of the institution of the progressive personal code, national forms and colors again took center stage, this time as a trending clothing style. Another feminist strategy was used by Femen when burning the Black Standard in front

of the Great Mosque of Paris during International Topless Jihad Day.

The third phase of re-imagination occurred when civil society merged "For a civil and solidary Republic" to denounce the Constitutional Assembly. The private sector also engaged in the dynamics of national unity, when The National Union of Communication and Advertising Agencies set up a national campaign together with billboard owners, using the national forms and colors around the slogan "There is no allegiance, but to Tunisia" (see fig. 2). It didn't take more than a day before it was diverted to: "There is no allegiance but to Allah" (see fig. 2). This spectacle gained momentum in the summer of 2013 with the *Raḥīl* campaign and sit-in when the national flag was diverted into a red card and pulled in front of the Constituent Assembly at Bardo Square to demand its dissolution. Protesters on both sides of the friction got well-defined orders from the party top which flag (not) to wave. For instance, while the national flag, the party flag and the *Tawḥīd* flag were waved together during mobilization organized by the *an-Nahḍa* party in the slipstream of the first political murders, militants now got a script from the party top only to wave the national flag and the party flag.

Figure 2: "There is no allegiance, but to ~~Tunisia~~ Allah". Dakhli, "Tunisian National Interest", Tunisia, 2013.

As state efforts to instill patriotism intensified, "flag-waving from below" that prevailed during the initial liberation phase made way for a certain form of "flag-waving from above" (Eriksen and Jenkins, *Flag, Nation* 9). The political landscape again became a staged and scripted landscape (Dakhli "Tunisian National Interest"). The imposition of the official pictorial structure of the national flag gradually fixed the delineation of the dynamized subjectivities since the revolution, pacifying and silencing disagreement and opposition into a historical modernist nationalist frame. The maturation of subjectivities confidently relating to Islamist ideologies in various new ways were decelerated and criminalized, as the *Anṣār*

al-Sharīʿa movement was outlawed. The "black flag hysteria" that accompanied the reception of different provocative Islamist actions overshadowed the nuances and ambiguities in the formation of these new subjectivities, sometimes combining nationalist and political Salafi references (Rogers "Image Politics"). Nevertheless, the three aforementioned phases of national re-imagination made visible the urgent necessity of a federating and stabilizing national compromise. The national flag thus generated from above the symbolic conditions for the rehabilitation of national unity and the prestige of the state, and by doing so facilitated the adoption of a new constitution (Zemni "Revolution").

Intensified national pride

"The first democratic constitution in the Arab World" was finally adopted "in the name of the Tunisian people" and "with the help of God" as stated in its preamble (*Constitution*). Despite the clear outcome of the following legislative and presidential elections, the struggle over the outline of the nation is still ongoing, as three different jihadist attacks in the center and coastal region fundamentally challenged the newly proclaimed second republic.

After the first appalling jihadist attack targeting tourists at the Bardo museum, and

surfing on the ongoing wave of "hyper-bolization of national pride" (Dakhli "Tunisian National Interest"), the ministry of tourism successfully challenged the world record for the largest flag. In his *Ascent of a Nation*, Tahar Manai proudly planted the Tunisian flag on the top of the Himalayas, conquering the highest peak in the world. With the project *Tounes Alia* the banner even fluttered in the strato-sphere. After the attack at the Imperial Marhaba Hotel at Port El Kantaoui, presi-dent Béji Caïd Essebsi called on the Prime Minister to revise the license granted to a political party still waving the *black flag*, alluding to *Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr*, the last Pan-Islamist party still recognized by the government. At the same time, a social media campaign went viral featuring post-cards of terror attacks in Western capitals, posing the question of whether you would also stop visiting Paris after the Charlie attacks, New York after 9/11 or London after the 7/7 bombings.

In contrast with the worldwide indignation at attacks in the heart of Europe, after the third jihadist attack targeting the presiden-tial guard on the Mohamed V Boulevard, indignation grew as there was with no security check nor a flag-layer designed on social media for solidarity with Tunisia. As in the aftermath of the second Paris

attacks in November that same year, where international buildings in different world cities effectively colored white red and blue, photoshopped images went viral depicting the Statue of Liberty in New York and The Eiffel Tower, among others, in red and white. The collective wound caused by the three consecutive jihadist assaults were healed with the multiplica-tion of national colors during different manifestations mourning the victims and condemning Islamist politics in general. Finally, in March 2017, on the occasion of the 61st anniversary of independence, the government inaugurated the newly built National Flag Square and raised a giant flag up the flagpole in Belvedere Park, overseeing the whole capital from its height. Whereas the reception of the three consecutive jihadist attacks clearly alluded to the international dimension of the poli-tical problems Tunisia is facing today, an already hyperbolic national pride further intensified in a caricatural way. Subjectivities could no longer be ima-gined outside the constitutional compro-mise sharply delineated by the imposed pictorial structure of the national flag.

Conclusion

The creative re-appropriation and diver-sion of the national flag during the initial liberation phase was an essential mediator

of the unity necessary for pushing forward revolutionary demands. Even a short time after Ben 'Ali was toppled, the national flag held the people together beyond histori-cal regional, generational, class and poli-tical differences, as it lost its rigid form and underwent a process of pictorial transfor-mation. It no longer imagined allegiance to the regime, but revolutionary affiliation, sacrifice, liberty, justice, dignity, inter-regional unity and cross-class solidarity. United under the colors of the nation, excluded subjectivities reclaimed their sovereign right to be. The very symbol of this unity, however, quickly became a sub-ject in a violent battlefield, following three contentious phases of re-imagination, fur-ther addressing unresolved historical issues. From the Manouba incident, through the national mourning of political opposition figures such as Chokri Belaid and the red card pulled in front of the Bardo, to the creation of National Flag Square on the hilltop of Belvedere Park, the youth unemployment, the postcolo-nial regional marginalization of the interior and south of the country and the related class divisions largely remain unad-dressed. Though the national flag is sup-posed to mark its Islamic adherence once necessary to mobilize against French colo-nial occupation, it was contested by new emerging Islamist subjectivities and later

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by more Salafist- and jihadist-asserted subjectivities coloring outside the lines of the nation. This contradiction points to a pictorial transformation of the flag throughout history, as it seems to depict religious alienation rather than the Islamic imaginary it is supposed to trigger.

The national flag hence lost its foundation and thus its multi-vocality and capacity to imagine national unity beyond historic divisions, not only categorically excluding nascent ambiguous Salafist- and jihadist-oriented Islamist subjectivities that contest the constitutional compromise of 2014, but also the once-unified subjectivities underlying the feelings of injustice related to access to land, the extraction of natural resources, the repression of informal local economies and prevailing corruption. When street politics was translated into official political structures after the occupation of the Kasbah, the ongoing formation of revolutionary subjectivities was challenged, and after three tragic jihadist attacks even blocked from the political game. The recovery from this last phase of deadly contention assured the consolidation of the historical compromise that underpinned the new constitution. However, the further intensification of the hyberbolization of national pride, from the world record of biggest flag or the need

to send the national colors to the stratosphere, convincingly shows how – unfortunately – the nation became a caricature of itself.

Together with the loss of its multi-vocal capacities, the flag re-activated a certain reductionist, essentialist and even oppressive potentiality. The re-imposition of the official pictorial structure of the national flag, and the blockage of revolutionary forms of becoming it facilitated, were productive for the restoration of national unity and state prestige, but less so for the demands for liberty, social justice and dignity. As argued by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, if a given state wants to be national, it does not need to over-emphasize the forms of its flag, how beautifully colored it might be. It just has to give "form and body" to the prevailing national consciousness of liberation and find a way to constitute a dignifying state "by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts" (Fanon 205).

Notes

[1] The youth unemployment rate is excessively high and almost doubled between 2006 and 2014, increasing from 17% to 31.4% by 2014. Figures regarding access to work also point to gendered inequalities. Women (43.5%) suffer from unemployment more than men (20.9%). Inequalities also affect regions. In the central west [of the country], the unemployment rate stands at 28.6%; 26.9% in the southwest; 24.8% in the southeast; and 11.1% in the central east. The structural imbalances that initially triggered the Tunisian revolution have thus continued to increase (Zammit "Tunisia Groaning")

[2] The flag incident at the Manouba was the first real case of flag desecration. However, the rapper Pscyho-M in December 2010 – that is a month before the start of the revolution – already distanced himself politically from the national flag in favor of what he calls the Tawhid Flag in his popular song 'Manipulation' (Ovshieva "Stomping for Tunisia"; Benyoussef "Gender"). Known for his sharp letter to the president "Rais LeBled", rapper El General followed the Islamist proposition in his song "Allahu Akbar", declaring "The banner of Islam always comes first" (El General "Allahu Akbar"). The enormous popularity of both artists is evidence of the broad popular support for radical Islamist ideologies among youth.

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