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A critical discourse analysis of the representation of Islamists on Facebook pages in post-revolution Tunisia

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Before the Tunisian Revolution of 14th January 2011, it had been assumed that Tunisians form a homogenous community in which all citizens are united around common cultural values and principles. Yet, after the Revolution and especially with the Islamist party "Ennahdha" in power, it has been explored that this 'idealistic' image of homogeneity has proved to be a utopian idea, an idea that was rather constructed by the former manipulative system of dictatorship. Instead, the Post-Revolution era has been characterized mainly by the striking division within the Tunisian society. This division consists in the existence of two polarized groups, namely Secularists/Liberals and Islamists/Conservatives. Motivated by the newly acquired freedom of speech, these two groups who used to co-exist in a "supposedly" peaceful atmosphere in the Pre-Revolution period have turned to voice their views about each other not only in broadcast settings but also in virtual social media spaces like "Facebook". These views seem to reveal the conflicting relationship of the two groups. Adopting Fairclough's research methodology in CDA and Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive approach to discourse, the present paper seeks to explore the ways in which the Secularists represent their Islamist rivals on their Facebook pages resorting to a number of Secular intellectuals' posts on Islamists as evidence.

Keywords: *Secularism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Islamism, Facebook, post-Revolution era*

1. Background to the study

This paper investigates a purely ideological discourse, namely the Tunisian Secularists' discourse about Islamists. That is why it is also in the heart of political discourse. This idea is emphasised by many Critical Discourse Analysts such as (Van Dijk, 1998b; Wodak, 2000). Indeed, they all agree that political discourse is essentially ideological since, according to them, if we consider a political discourse that takes place between politicians or political activists or social groups, we are

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necessarily in front of two ideologies. These two ideologies are divided into progressivists vs conservatives, socialists and "neoliberals", and so on. Usually these ideologies are expressed in the discourse of speakers whether implicitly or explicitly. (Van Dijk, 1998, 2000) More than that, critical discourse analysts maintain that political ideology and other forms of ideology control our everyday discourse.

1.1. Defining ideology

On Wikipedia.org, ideology is "defined as the system of abstracted meaning applied to public matters, thus making this concept central to politics. Implicitly, in societies that distinguish between public and private life, every political or economic tendency entails ideology, whether or not it is propounded as an explicit system of thought". Similarly, critical discourse analysts define it as a kind of "socially shared mental representations" (Van Dijk, 1998). Indeed, the relevance of the concept of ideology to this paper stems from the assumption that the antagonism that is expressed by Tunisian secularists while referring to their Islamist rivals is motivated by the huge ideological differences between the two groups.

1.2. Secularism in the Tunisian context

Secularism dates back to the Post-colonial era. This era was led by a group of educated men who were influenced by French liberalism and modernization. Definitely, this group of people did play a pivotal role in resisting the French colonisation of Tunisia. The most prominent figure of them is Habib Bourguiba, the first president of the Tunisian Republic.

As a matter of fact, Bourguiba's secular ideas were built mainly upon the inconsistency between modernity and religion, and women's rights including free and public education. For secularism to be entrenched in the Tunisian society, Bourguiba tried to institutionalize all of these secular elements so as to promote his ideas as well as to modernize the nation and eradicate illiteracy, and ignorance from the Tunisian society. In other words, his purpose was to build an open-minded and self-reliant Tunisian people who no longer believes in myths but questions everything in his quest for knowledge and personality-building.

Similarly, the second Tunisian president *Zine Abidine Ben Ali* followed Bourguiba's path and went so far as to outlaw Islamic parties and silence all Islamists. Following this reasoning, Tunisians who have gown up on these values seem to refuse all values that contradict with this ideological framework. Hence, the Post-Revolution ideological conflict between Islamists, mainly those who have come back to the political life after the Ennahdha party won the 2011 elections, and

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Secularists has come to surface. This conflict has voiced itself in different spaces including informal and formal settings. Facebook, the most popular social network which connects people worldwide is assumed to mirror multiple and various evidences of the "verbal fight" between Islamists and Secularists over different national issues.

1.3. Islamism in the Tunisian context

In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution Islamism was reintroduced in the Tunisian political life and became popular among Tunisians. Important to explain is the fact that in the Tunisian context, unlike in other countries, Islamism has been understood as an opposition to democracy since, according to secularists, under the rule of Islamic law or "Sharia's" democracy, which is a western concept, cannot be fully established in non-western context since this regime is compatible with western heritage and especially relevant to its life-style and socio-cultural specificities. In contrast, despite the strong impact of "Bourguibism" on the Tunisian society, the Islamist party *Ennahdha has* gained popularity among the Tunisian population. This is explained by the fact that lay Tunisians have been associating this Islamist party with religious morals and also because religion has a central role in the everyday life of most Tunisan people and in the way they shape their world views. Another fact that has led Tunisian people including intellectuals to sympathise with the *Ennahdha* party is the "toppled" president *Ben Ali'*s persecution and exclusion of Islamists during his presidency.

Having understood the conceptual and historical background of Secularism and Islamism in Tunisia, it has become easier to predict the nature of the relationship between *Ennahdha* and other secular political parties in Tunisia. Obviously, one cannot but discern the antagonistic discourse produced by each party while referring to its rival. In this very context lies the relevance of this paper though it focuses solely on the Secularists' discourse about Islamists.

1.3. Work on ideological discourse on social media (Facebook): most relevant studies

Facebook is a type of social media platform where everyone including political activists and intellectuals voice their views about different national and international issues including political issues. Since its establishment in February 2004, Facebook has become the greatest and most popular social networking site in modern time. In Tunisia, The success of the popular uprisings for instance, has been achieved through the Tunisians' extensive use of Twitter and Facebook as a mobilization tool and also to organise their activities (Raddatz, 2011; Chiluwa, 2012d).

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Similarly, Facebook has played different important roles in the post-revolution era. For instance, it has contributed to educate people about political concepts and inform them about political parties and election rules and principles. This is for its bright side. As for its dark side, this very platform has revealed most importantly the striking division among Tunisian secularists and conservatives. This tendency seems to be one of the Revolution's drawbacks.

More than that, Pro-Secularists Facebookers and their Pro-Conservative rivals usually tend to criticize each other's ideas, convictions, and so on using a polarized discourse where the "US" is valorised and the "Them" is denigrated. Literature review on ideological Facebook discourse has revealed several studies the most relevant of them is Chiluwa's (2014) 'critical discourse analysis of Facebook posts in the fuel subsidy removal protests' in Nigeria 2012. This study shows, among other things, that in the Nigerian context Facebook played a crucial role in mobilizing people so as to exercise pressure on the government for the aim of removing subsidy on the fuel. Yet, Facebook discourse did also demonstrate that protesters were not able to achieve the intended purpose since they were divided into two groups; the one who supported fuel subsidy removal and the one who "still pledged loyalty to political in-group and ethnic interest rather than national interest" (Chiluwa 2014, 2).

Equally important is the study conducted by Zouche (2013) in which he investigated the 'aspects of the social psychological phenomenon of group polarization revealed in the conflicting comments posted by Pro-Conservatives and Pro-Labour British participants on the official Facebook page of the British Conservative party' from a pragmatic perspective. As a main finding of the study, Zouche (2013) found out that British participants tended to polarize in quite extreme directions by drawing heavily on particular highly offensive strategies of "Impoliteness", and by making frequent use of some line of argumentation to criticize out-group participants and damage their collective face.

The relevance of these studies lies in the fact that the corpus under study is in the heart of polarized ideological political discourse even though it does not take place between political activists.

2. Critical discourse analysis

This section discusses, first, CDA's definition and scope, then its methodology.

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2.1. Definition and scope of critical discourse analysis

According to Critical Discourse Analysts, language is a "social practice" (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258), the study and analysis of written and spoken discourse serve to explore the sources of power, dominance, and inequality (van Dijk, 2001). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to describe, interpret, and explain the relationship between language and society. The central purposes of CDA are to "critically analyze those who are in power, those who are responsible, and those who have the means and the opportunity" to deal with social problems (van Dijk 1986, 4).

Blommaert (2005) who was inspired, like other major CDA analysts, by Michael Halliday's systematic-functional and socio-semiotic view of language, extends the scope of critical discourse analysis to cover the effects of power in discourse produced in the overall context of language use. In order to comprehensively understand the dynamics of societies-in-the-world, CDA needs to build on findings from linguistic anthropology and Pragmatics. Taking as an assumption the idea that communicative events are ultimately influenced by social structures in the sense that they produce such social attributes as authority, power, inequality, and ideology, CDA focuses on the use of language in institutional contexts and the relations between language, power, and ideology.

In the present paper, the ideological discourse of the Tunisians who are pro-Secularism/Liberalism and those who are pro-Conservatism/Islamism in the Post-Revolution era is perceived as a sign of verbal aggression caused by the clear ideological division within the Tunisian society. In such a discourse, each group of people while criticizing the opposite group resorts to discursive strategies whose major aim is to promote the "US" ideology and demonize the "Them" ideology. Structures of ideological discourse analysis, some which are explored and examined in this paper, involve "actor description" (including the positive "we" in-group description and negative "other" out-group representation), emphasizing the negative aspects of "others" and hiding the negative description of "our" group), arguments/argumentative structures (e.g. the presentation of 'our' case as legitimate while representing the other's case as illegitimate) . This forms the framework for the explanatory analytical phase of the paper. Additionally, it is significant to demonstrate the thematic resources that inspire the Secularists' argumentative discourse, being the focus of the present paper and highlight the fact that such resources stand in contrast to those inspiring the Islamists' discourse, thus situating the context of the Polarized ideological discourse.

Given this social orientation of CDA, its relevance and utility to the analysis of ideological discourse becomes most apparent.

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2.2. The crucial role of context in CDA

According to Blommaert (2005) context is always needed in discourse analysis and contextualization is dialogical. One major type of contexts is the complex of linguistic means and communicative skills generally viewed as resources. The context of resources provides an understanding of why some individuals, but not others, have access to these resources and how inequalities result between those who possess them and those who do not. Indeed, Blommaert (2005) argues that the existing scope of context must be extended to include not only national and international contexts of language use but also the context long before and after the emanation of discourse 'as a linguistically articulated object'.

In this paper, it will be vital to consider such parameters as:

1. Facebook posts were written in the Tunisian Post-Revolution
2. These Posts were written by Tunisian well-known intellectuals who do not belong to political parties.
3. The popularity of these intellectuals and the crucial issues written about are assumed to have impact on the Tunisians' voting preferences and political orientations.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Selection

This paper's data is a selection of text-based posts on *Facebook* written by Tunisians (residing in Tunisia). These are intellectuals who are mainly social activists, teachers, journalists, poets, and so on. The data consist in 10 posts counting 928 words and addressing current national issues. Obviously, all the posts were translated from Arabic into English.

4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

This paper perceives *Facebook* posts, the data of the present paper, as a form of computer-mediated ideological discourse, which is also a form of ‘polarized discourse' (Van Dijk 1998; 2000). Generally, this type of discourse is characterized by discursive strategies that highlight unequal power relations, forms of oppression in a society so as to uncover discursive means of mental control and social influence and to disclose, reveal and uncover what is implicit or hidden including the underlying ideologies of discourse producers.

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4.2.1. CDA's Methodology: Fairclough's model

Fairclough's research methodology in CDA consists of a three-way function, namely description, interpretation, and explanation/evaluation. Description is interested in the analysis of linguistic/ textual features of discourse. It seeks to answer the 'what' question: i.e. what are the most apparent linguistic features used in the text? Interpretation, on the other hand, is concerned with the analysis the social, ideological, and cognitive resources employed by discourse producers. It answers the 'How?' question: i.e. what is the effect of the patterns identified in the descriptive phase? Most important, still, to CDA is the explanatory/evaluative function for it is what makes discourse analysis 'critical'. This is usually done by exposing the underlying ideological perspectives through social theory. These three steps will provide the analytic angles from which the data under study will be analysed.

4.2.2. Van Dijk's CDA Analytical Framwework

According to Van Dijk's *Ideological Discourse Analysis* (2004) "ideological discourse will typically be semantically oriented towards specific topics, local meanings and implications". For the sake of relevance and clarity, those strategies identified by Van Dijk are summarized as follows:

Self-identity descriptions
Negative lexicalization
Hyperbole
Negative comparison
Generalization
Concretization
Warning
Norm and value violation
Presupposition
Vagueness
Irony/sarcasm

According to Van Dijk (2004), 'a variety of discursive structures may be utilized to express ideological beliefs' and the socio- personal views revealed through them. The general strategy of all ideology, as defined here revolves around "positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation".

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5. Findings and discussion

Fairclough's three step methodology, synthesised in the above reviewed approaches, has been applied to 10 Facebook posts of Tunisian Secularists in which they criticize their ideological enemies, the Islamists. The following are the findings of this research and a discussion of their significance.

5.1. Description

The following patterns have been identified:

5.1.1. Deixis

There is a recurrent use of the third person plural pronoun 'they', the second person plural pronoun "you", the proximal demonstratives 'this' and 'these', the adverb 'recently' and the present, the present perfect and the simple past tense. All of these devices are construed as signs of polarization and antagonism whereby the other who is referred to through the personal pronouns "they" and "you" is represented as an enemy to the speakers. In other words, the Islamists / Muslim brotherhood are referred to in the third person (they or you) and the demonstrative 'those'. These devices are indicators of distance. Islamists are framed in terms of their Ideology, as socio-political entities; a homogeneous group that is not "US". As for determiners, the predominant pattern is that of indefiniteness.

5.1.2. Nominalisation

The discourse revealed through the *Facebook* posts displays a pattern where there is a frequent use of nouns which are used in the form of adjectives such as 'terrorist/s', nouns of an abstract nature like "Islamism", "Muslim Brotherhood", "corruption" and nouns denoting animals like "rats". Consequently, the text provides a set of fuzzy concepts.

5.1.3. Metaphors

Reading the Tunisian Secularists' Facebook posts, one obviously notices the metaphorical expressions and metaphors used by this group when they refer to their Islamist ideological rivals. One of the dominant metaphors used is that of the animal metaphor such as 'the rat/s metaphor'

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5.1.4. Adjectives

A deeper structural study of Secularists' Facebook posts shows that these posts' grammar associates predicative adjectives with frightening information about Islamists and attributive adjectives with given information. Important to emphasize is the fact that almost all adjectives that are commonly used in the posts are attributive. This reveals a frame of mind that seems to take things for granted.

5.1.5. Semantic ambiguity

Two types of semantic ambiguity are identified in the Facebook posts under study, namely lexical ambiguity as in "criminal", and "ignorant" that are vague concepts carrying more than one meaning; and structural ambiguity as in "fearophobia". It is not clear on what basis the Secularists describe their ideological enemies as such. This tendency renders their claim aggressive and accusatory.

5.1.6. Speech acts

The use of representative and directive speech acts (Searle 1995) is commensurate with critical Secularists' Facebook posts whose main aim seems to be to attack the Islamists/Muslim Brotherhood. However, the use of declaratives as well as expressives (the text is apparently full of expressive speech acts) is more akin to ideological polarized discourse.

5.2. Interpretation

Because of the limited scope of this paper, only a few of the posts that clearly illustrate the Secularists' negative representation of the Islamists, particularly those that reflect some of the ideological categories enumerated above, e.g. Negative Lexicalization, Generalization, Vagueness, and Hyperbole etc. are reproduced in the analysis. In the example of Facebook posts analysed below, aspects of verbal aggression and antagonism make up Secularists' Facebook posts. Adopting Van Dijk's (2004) analytical framework, the following discursive strategies have emerged from the analysis of Tunisian Secularist discourse about Islamists on Facebook:

5.2.1. Negative lexicalization

This discursive structure is a predominant aspect in Tunisian Secularists' discourse about Islamists. As a matter of fact, this very discursive strategy indicates the clear

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division that shapes the Tunisian society in Post-Revolution era. As such, in the selected Facebook posts, Secularists tend to associate their ideological enemies, the Islamists with the worst of adjectives. The following post is an illustration that reveals this discursive strategy:

p1 *'Muslim Brotherhood group members in Tunisia have not yet recovered from their "fearophobia" and they will not recover unless they get rid of their shameful culture of partisanship'*

This Facebook post shows that Secularists portray the Islamists as sick people who suffer from what they call "fearophobia" although this term doesn't exist in English dictionaries. Yet, they create it so as to amplify their negative image in order to manipulate the public (Facebookers).

5.2.2. Generalization

Generalization is another discursive strategy used by the Tunisian Secularists in their representation of the Islamists. In so doing, they intend to put all the Islamists in one basket. For them, all Islamists are terrorist and hypocritical people. This structure occurs in many Facebook posts, most importantly in the following posts:

p2 *"You, the Islamists , are all terrorists"*

p3 *"Some of the Islamists' instances of doublespeak are :(1) They praise the courageous Palestinian movement "Hamas", meanwhile they deal with Zionists (as an illustration: the embrace of Jbeli ti Mac Cain, and Erdogan's relationship with Israel) (2) They show their sympathy and support to Palestine while they refuse to include the criminalization of normalization with Israel in the Tunisian constitution.(3) They criticize the states' coups, while they support those who do them in Sudan like "Omar Bechir". (4)They protest against the way the system of 'Bourguiba' dealt with the ones who did the "coup" of state in 1962, while they celebrate Erdogan's allies' slaughtering of the Turkish military in 2016.'(5) They claim that they want to promote democracy while they take their political ideas from Qatar which they present as a democratic country."*

The illustrations above clearly show that Secularists, in their criticism of Islamists, follow an argumentative strategy starting with a speech act of accusation through which they accuse Islamists of hypocrisy .The accusatory meaning of hypocrisy is implicitly implied by the term "doublespeak". Then, Secularists resort to real evidences to support their argument.

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5.2.3. Negative comparisons

Negative comparison is one noticeable discursive strategy that Secularists tend to use when they refer to Islamists. Indeed, in many instances, they describe them as animal-like creatures and particularly as 'rats'. Their choice of "rats" to compare Islamists with is motivated by the fact that in Tunisian culture the 'rat' symbolizes destruction, disgust and impurity. The following posts are illustrations of this idea.

p4 *«"The rats haven't understood yet that Turkey went to hell after the failure of the coup»'*

p5 *"... Some friends of mine are still sharing videos for a 'Nahdhaoui' female or for a rat of the rats"*

5.2.4. Irony/ Sarcasm

In their Facebook posts about Islamists, Secularists tend to discredit the Islamists' ideology and deeds using a discursive sarcastic structure. The ironic effects are created through expressing the opposite of what they genuinely think. For instance, Secularists who usually describe Islamists as people who are radical and do not know the rules of the dialogue ironically depict them on Facebook as "intelligent intellectuals" who are always right. Yet, they depict themselves as 'ignorant' and 'empty-minded' people. The following lines are some illustrations of the use of irony in the Secularists' discourse about Islamists:

p6 *"I don't like to open a discussion with you because you are always right, and you understand everything, you are intelligent. As for me, I'm stupid. You are intellectuals, I'm ignorant, you are cultivated and I'm the empty-minded one"*

The Secularists' derogatory discourse of Islamists makes use of irony as an efficient discursive structure to mock their ideological enemies' ideas about the place of woman in society and how she is portrayed in Islamism. Irony in this context is conveyed through the following lines written by a female secularist who was addressing the Islamists whom she thinks they consider woman as someone who is' incomplete in mind and religion':

p7 *... Are you sure you want to waste your time with someone like me who is incomplete in mind and religion?'*

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5.2.5. Implication

Since the data under study is a type of political discourse, it is inherently far from being an innocent discourse. Instead, it consists of many discursive implications that political actors and people engaging in political communication use in order to express their ideas. Obviously, The Secularists' critical Facebook posts on Islamists are loaded with negative implications. A deep scrutiny of their posts indicates that they tend to use expressions that have negative connotations in order to portray the Islamists as weak and radical politicians. As illustration, in **P7** while commenting on "Adel Alimi" one known figure in *"Ennadha"* Islamist party in Tunisia, secularists intend to mention his former low social status before the Tunisian revolution (being a "vegetable vendor"). In so doing, they intend to represent Islamists as incompetent people who are not fit for the status of politicians.

What is more, they intend to promote a frightening image of the Islamists by representing them as extremist politicians who intervene in the religious affairs of Tunisians and control people's religious practice of their religious 'duties'. The verb 'warn' is used to refer to this extremist tendency of Islamists. So to speak, two negative images of the Islamists are implied in the Tunisian Secularists' Facebook discourse about the Islamists. These images are clearly expressed in the following selected post:

p8 «*I have been told that 'Adel Alimi', the former vegetable vendor, said that the post-revolution "mofsi" warns those who do not fast Ramadan that he will post their photos on Facebook*»

5.2.6. Victimization and Vagueness:

One of the essential aims of the Secularists' Facebook posts seems to be to persuade the public to refrain from supporting the Islamists and stop trusting them. This is not to forget that such a discursive behaviour is expected from political actors since such a discourse is based on an ideological competition whose main aspect is promoting one's ideas and denigrating the other's. In the piece of discourse under study, Victimization and vagueness are tow discursive strategies that the Secularists use in order to represent their ideological enemies, the Islamists as traitors and hypocritical politicians who did nothing but abort the revolution's objectives, thus associating them with bad aspects. Yet, this implied speech act of accusation seems to be unfounded since Secularists did not explain how the Islamists 'aborted' the revolution/s. Therefore, their statement seems to be vague and not supported by real evidences, thus weak. This is especially obvious when reading the following post:

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p 9 *«Failure to achieve the objectives of the Revolution is like doing an abortion which is a religiously forbidden act or "Haram" for the Ennahdha group. However, aborting the revolutions is allowed "halaal".»*

p10 *«All the indicators of global political rate indicate the impending collapse of the fascist ideologies trading Religion ... and the Ennahda realize it...»*

In brief, the Secularists' discourse on Facebook is a purely political discourse since it tackles political questions in a given historical context which is the post-revolution era. The writers of these posts are intellectuals who voice their views and discuss their ideological opponents' ideas and they also have impact on the political scene. Besides, this type of discourse is an argumentative discourse that seeks to build a position and defend it using arguments. In so doing, they seek to persuade with their ideas the public and damage the Islamists' face and political image, thus pushing the public to change their political and voting preferences. Linguistic resources and discursive strategies are the Secularists' tools to achieve these political goals.

5.3. Explanation/Evaluation

The above analysed Facebook posts indicate that the Secularists' discourse about Islamists takes the form of a violent discourse regardless of the truthfulness of its content. This is because what all the linguistic devices and discursive strategies used in such a discourse have as a main goal is to show their hatred to Islamists through declaring a verbal 'war' on them. Yet, in the context of democratic transition this speech can build neither democracy nor diversity that Secularists claim to advocate for.

Besides, this violent discourse is contradictory to the principles of peace, openness and dialogue, and so on that Secularists advocate for in their Facebook posts and in their academic research writings. That is to say, some secular intellectuals like "Olfa Youssef", who has been known for her harsh criticism of the use of aggressive expressions taken from football jargon in political discourse of many Facebookers, turned to using similar expressions and sometimes more violent words while referring to her ideological enemies, the Islamists. It is in this very context that contradiction in the Secularists' discourse lies.

Eventually, what is important to understand through the analysis of the Tunisian Secularists' aggressive discourse about their ideological enemies, the Islamists, is the idea that this discourse employs the same discursive mechanisms that the criticized discourse uses (that of the Islamists). This tendency seems to be the norm in Tunisian Post-Revolution political discourse in general.

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6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse the Tunisian Post-Revolution Secularists' discourse about their ideological enemies, the Islamists, through studying a set of Facebook posts written by Secular intellectuals. This paper has revealed that such a discourse is an aggressive one that seeks to denigrate the Islamist enemies and use all linguistic and discursive structures to negatively represent them. In this political discourse, aggression can be detected if analysts observe the following checklist:

- word choice
- selected adjectives and metaphors
- discursive strategies used

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