

Tunisian teacher becomes symbol of resistance to bigotry

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

Faiza Souissi faced an angry crowd when she arrived at Oqba Ibn Nafaa primary school for the first day of class. Souissi, who had been a teacher at the Sfax school in southern Tunisia for years, stood accused of being an “atheist” intent on spreading dangerous ideas to her pupils. None of the parents or protesters had ever met her face to face.

As the uproar grew, Souissi’s colleagues sheltered her in a school office before police arrived to escort her home.

The crowd alleged that Souissi was virulently anti-Muslim and frequently shut her classroom windows to prevent pupils from hearing Friday prayers. They accused her of comparing the sound of the Islamic prayer ritual to a “donkey’s bray.”

Souissi denied the allegations, which had been spread by radical Islamists.

“I teach from 9-12 [noon] and we know that Friday prayers start in the afternoon,” Souissi told a local television station. “It is true that I’m against the hijab and I feel bad when I see small girls at primary schools wearing that piece of cloth. That said, I had never asked them to remove the hijab.”

Individuals returned to harassing her despite a police warning. They were led by a local trade union activist known to be a member of the Islamist Ennahda party, which is a partner in Tunisia’s coalition government led by Nidaa Tounes.

Souissi, a feminist activist with the Association of Democratic Women, became a symbol for the struggle of personal freedoms in the

Maghreb. While Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia officially protect freedom of religion and consciousness, religious minorities and those with different cultural views often face discrimination.

Following the demonstration, police in Sfax arrested three individuals, including a woman who allegedly took the teacher’s mobile phone to find “incriminating material.”

Tunisia’s trade union, Education Ministry, main human rights groups and many members of parliament voiced support for Souissi.

Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi, who recently became the first Arab head of state to publicly support equal inheritance and marriage rights for women – a taboo issue for many Muslims – was reportedly shocked by the teacher’s treatment. He lent her support in a televised interview.

Many of the country’s intellectuals condemned the anti-Souissi campaign, with civic group Tunisian Association for High Quality Education urging politicians and intellectuals to rally behind the teacher.

“Attacking the intellectuals and the elites was the first step to imposing a totalitarian regime,” the organisation said. “Stirring religious emotions against intellectuals is an old game to marginalise intellectuals.”

Journalist Sofiene Ben Hamida said Souissi “represents a symbol of resistance against the project of the Islamists and that is why they targeted her. The fear is that now the schools of the republic would be transformed into religious schools.”

Religious intolerance is not a problem just in Tunisia, however. Prejudice against Christians, Bahais and Ahmadis as well as sexual minorities, is common in the region.



Triumphant. Tunisian teacher Faiza Souissi (C) flashes the victory sign as colleagues protest in solidarity with her. (ifm.tn)

In Morocco, Salafists took to the streets in August to protest a government proposal to allow women to practise as bailiffs, arguing that the move is “un-Islamic.”

While Morocco’s 2011 constitution, drafted after the “Arab spring”-inspired demonstrations, guarantees freedom of religion, the reality is more complex

Foreign Christians – the majority of whom are from sub-Saharan Africa – and the country’s tiny Jewish community – about 2,500 people – practise their faiths openly. However, native Moroccans who identify as Christian are frequently subject to intolerance.

Moroccan Rachid Hamami, a Christian, said he was shocked by how fellow Moroccans treat him.

“I hope that ordinary Moroccans can be open to other religions and cultures, not to embrace them

because believing in a religion is personal,” Hamami said. “Openness to other religions and cultures broadens our minds and helps us to avoid hate and violence towards people who are different from us.”

Jawad Mabrouk, a psychiatrist who has written about Moroccans’ reaction to religious and cultural diversity, concluded that the level of intolerance is similar to that in Algeria and Tunisia.

“Is what is most important to us our faith or our unity as a people and society?” Mabrouk asked. “Is it important that we impose our faith on the traders, the carpenters, nurses, soldiers and others or that they provide us good services?”

“The Moroccan does not comprehend the concept of acceptance of other religions. He is afraid to embrace such a concept. He believes that all Moroccans should be

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Journalist
Sofiene Ben Hamida

Muslim,” he said.

Algerian writer Amine Zaoui blamed the trend on the advance of religious ideas from the Middle East and the failure of leaders and elites to defend local culture.

“In 1954, we were a colonised state but we had intellectuals and writers, such as Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, Jean Amrouche, Mouloud Mammeri, Mouloud Feraoun,” he said. “In the middle of our independence war in 1957 we had women named Assia Djebar, Hassiba Ben Bouali, Djamilia Bouhired, Anna Greki, Myriem Ben who loved freedom, beauty and writing. In 1965, we had beautiful cities named Oran, Annaba, Bejaia, Cherchell.

“Now we have pushed our women from public spaces and murdered our languages and tongues and we are instead listening to speeches by violent preachers.”

Football qualifiers offer social, political drama in the Middle East



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As countries in the Middle East and North Africa compete for a place in next year’s FIFA World Cup in Russia, the political and social implications are making for unusual drama.

Nowhere is that more pronounced than in Syria. While Syrians continue to suffer from a civil war that began in 2011, the fortunes of their national team have risen and Syria is on course for a place among the 32 teams at the 2018 World Cup tournament.

The Syrian national team is to take on Australia over two legs in a play-off in October. However, Syrians are divided over support for the national team – viewed as being part of the ruling Assad regime.

“I understand people’s need for a happy event linked to Syria and their true desire to be united... but, at the same time, anyone who knows Syria well knows that in Syria there are no independent institutions and that includes sporting institutions,” Syrian journalist Hala Droubi told the Los Angeles Times.

Syria’s route to the World Cup reflects the tense geopolitical situation in the Middle East. Syria secured its play-off spot following a surprise late equaliser on September 5 against Iran, whose government backs the Assad regime. The goal was scored by Omar al-Somah, a Deir ez-Zor native who recently returned to the national team after a five-year absence owing to his anti-Assad stance.

Somah, who plays for Al-Ahli Saudi FC, has been the leading scorer in Saudi Arabia’s top tier over the past three seasons. He has come under criticism

from fans in Saudi Arabia, which is backing the Syrian rebels, for returning to the national team.

The prolific al-Ahli striker was not the only Syrian footballer back after a prolonged absence. Captain Firas al-Khatib returned to the national team this summer after a five-year boycott, also owing to his anti-Assad views.

“Whatever happens, 12 million Syrians will love me... [The] other 12 million will want to kill me,” he told ESPN.

Whatever happens with Syria’s World Cup ambitions and whatever the outcome of the more than six-year civil war, Syrian football has suffered a massive blow. Hundreds of Syrian footballers have fled to neighbouring countries and Europe and many others have been killed.

According to an investigation by former Syrian sports writer Anas Ammo, “at least 38 football players from the top two divisions of the Syrian leagues and dozens more from lower divisions” have been shot, bombed or tortured to death by the Assad regime, ESPN reported. Syria’s footballers of the future, meanwhile, are turning away. Mahmoud Dahoud, a 21-year-old who plays for Germany’s Borussia Dortmund and is considered the best Syrian footballer of his generation, has opted to represent Germany at the youth level.

Another strange circumstance was Saudi Arabia’s decision to appoint Argentinian Edgardo Bauza as head coach, replacing Bert van Marwijk, who had guided the Green Falcons to a spot in the 2018 World Cup. Bauza had been the United Arab Emirates’ head coach. The decision by the UAE Football Association [UAEFA] to allow him to head up the Saudi national team is a sign of the strength of ties

between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

“Based on the principle of Gulf unity and the strengthening of ongoing cooperation between the two football associations, UAEFA has agreed to the Saudi Arabian Football Association’s (SAFF)



Unusual drama. Head Coach Ayman Hakeem of Syria’s national football team at the Azadi Stadium in Tehran, on September 4. (AP)

request to appoint Edgardo Bauza as the Saudi national team’s head coach,” a statement from the SAFF said.

SAFF Chairman Adel Ezzat expressed his “thanks and appreciation” to the UAEFA for the decision, hailing the “affection and brotherly love” that unite the two football associations. At a time when Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, among others, boycott Qatar for its alleged support of outlawed groups, such rhetoric is telling.

Iran, which has come under criticism from Arab countries for its support for Syrian President Bashar Assad and Qatar, may have already secured World Cup qualification but not without off-the-pitch controversy.

In the September 5 Iran versus Syria qualifier, Iranian women were prevented from entering Tehran’s Azadi Stadium to watch the match, even though Syrian female supporters were allowed to enter.

The issue of female attendance of football matches is a hot topic in Iran, with female members of parliament pushing strongly for a change, particularly as Iranian women will certainly be in Russian stadiums to cheer on the national team.

“A lot of Iranians, men and women, will go to Russia. They are proud of their national team and they want to support the players during a big important tournament like the World Cup,” activist Darya Safai, founder of the group Let Iranian Women Enter Their Stadiums, told Russia Today.

“In the Islamic Republic, women can’t be part of the ‘beautiful game’ but in Russia, Iranian women will have the right and the possibility to participate, just like all other people from different nationalities can.”

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