

# Quranic Kindergartens in Tunisia: Breeding a Wahhabi Elite

Hanene Zbiss – Tunisia

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*Since the revolution, Tunisia has witnessed the proliferation of so-called “Quranic kindergartens,” which are established by religious associations and mostly operate outside the law. Their mission: to create a Wahhabi elite in Tunisian society.*

These kindergartens subject the children to an intensive religious education and strict treatment unsuited to their age, in addition to implementing a curriculum imported from abroad that is incompatible with the religious values of most Tunisians. The government, which is aware of this situation, is trying to find a legal solution for these enterprises in order to be able to monitor their activities.

When Adam (4 years old) was asked if he wanted to return to his Quranic kindergarten in Manouba, he nodded his head back as if to say “no.” The joyful expression on his face disappeared as he fell silent and his gaze grew somber. No matter how hard his mother tried to persuade him to sing a song he had learned there, which he had repeated often at home, he vehemently refused. His stint there did not last more than three months. Yet today, Adam does not even want to walk past his former kindergarten. He still remembers the harsh treatment he underwent there.

While there are 4,005 legal kindergartens in the country, there are no exact figures on the prevalence of Quranic kindergartens. The Ministry for Women and Family Affairs has counted 40, though some officials in charge of these establishments have told the press that there are hundreds (from a 20 April 2013 article published in the electronic newspaper Binaa News, entitled, “Nour al-Bayne league: Quranic schools are a revolutionary achievement that must not be sacrificed”).

## A Secret World

It wasn't easy to gain access to these kindergartens, since the owners restrict entrance to anyone except the staff and children. In fact, at the Quranic kindergartens we managed to visit, we observed that entry was prohibited even for the parents. When the latter would come to pick up their children at the end of the day, their children would be “delivered” to them at the gate.

The nature of these places and what goes on inside is thus a closely guarded secret. Thus it was necessary to go undercover as a kindergarten teacher to gain entrance, after undergoing special training.

Following an online search on an Islamist website, we came across an ad for a training course for kindergartens teachers in Bizerte, which cost 30 dinars. On the morning of the 18th of March, we went to the listed address for a kindergarten where the course was being offered.

The kindergarten is located down a winding alleyway in a slum. In the area, many men were bearded while many women wore headscarves or were fully veiled and wearing the niqab.

We opened the door of a small house where two women were wearing a niqab in the reception. One was the director of the establishment, the other was a trainer.

Not far from them were the trainees enrolled in the course. They were young women (between the ages of 20 and 30), all wearing niqab or chador, who had come from Bizerte and the surrounding areas. One of them had even brought her two-and-a-half year-old-daughter, who was wearing hijab. We had dressed the same way.

Each candidate had to fill out a form, but it was not necessary to present an identity card. After these minor formalities, the first course began with a lecture defining the characteristics of the “preacher-teacher” and her sacred mission of “educating a godly generation.” The training course consisted of 6 five-hour sessions, three times per week.

The same course was offered in parallel at another Quranic kindergarten in a slum in Sousse, with the same trainer. This time, however, the profile of the candidates was a little different, as most of them had already trained at Quranic kindergartens and wanted to improve their skills, particularly in teaching children.

The initial training focused on memorisation and flawless recitation of the Quran, according to the three rules practiced in the Muslim world: Al-Nouraniya, Mennat al-Rahmane and Nour al-Bayan. There are rules to learn the correct pronunciation, while respecting the tone and phonetic properties of each letter of the sacred text. These are mostly used in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which indicates how Wahhabi influence has been spreading in Tunisia since the revolution.

### **Training with a Wahhabi Character**

To work at a Quranic kindergarten, one must know one of these three rules, in order to be able to teach them to children. The length of the training varies, generally ranging between five days and six weeks. It is also strongly encouraged to have already memorised a good part of the Quran.

An oral and a written test are required to learn the rules of Mennat al-Rahmane and Nour al-Bayan, but not for al-Nouraniya, the easiest technique to learn. We could not study any of them, as this required knowing the sacred text by heart. But the women we met during the session, titled “How to be a good [kindergarten] teacher,” gave us some information. We thus learned that Ennouraniya’s office in Ennasr regularly holds 25-hour, five-day training sessions, at a price of 65 dinars per person. (This price drops to 50 dinars if the client is a religious association seeking to hold training sessions for its trainers.)

We visited the office in question. The young man at the reception told us that the diploma awarded at the end of the training course comes directly from Saudi Arabia, and is signed by al-Furqan Foundation, which also provides all the educational material. After the course, the graduates are qualified to work at a Quranic kindergarten, following a probation period not exceeding one month.

These courses offered at a very low price do not require a high school certification. Anyone, whether with a high school diploma or not, can enroll in the courses and in a matter of days, become a teacher at a Quranic kindergarten. This was the case for a young woman (who shall remain nameless), who attended a training session at the Abdallah Massaoud Islamic Centre, from 3 to 14 September 2012 – though her highest educational achievement was attending the first year of

secondary school, which she failed twice, resulting in her dismissal from high school, as her transcripts show. However, the law and regulations of the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs require that a kindergarten teacher hold at least a baccalaureate (seventh secondary year).

The initial training we received allowed us to enter the secret world of Quranic kindergartens, under the guise of seeking an internship there.

### **Featureless Faces**

On the surface, Quranic kindergartens are nothing but a special version of their secular counterparts: brightly coloured paintings adorn the walls of the centre and posters advertising the services they offer. Once inside, we started to feel the difference. At the kindergarten we visited during the training, for example, we noticed that all the rooms were named after famous Muslim figures.

In one of them, there was a big sign in Arabic illustrated with religious images (e.g. beard, Mecca, hijab, Quran). On the walls, there were drawings downloaded from the Islamic website AlBetaqa.com (which offers educational materials for Islamic education for all age groups), illustrating the hadiths (sayings of the Prophet) and douaa (prayers). The remarkable thing about these drawings, which are given to children to colour, is that the characters in them have no eyes, no nose, and no mouth. Drawing facial features is not permitted in the Wahhabi doctrine.

Such rules can apparently have disastrous consequences for children. “I had a case involving a 3-year-old girl who was brought to my office for therapy by her mother. The girl pretended that she could not see. We found out that at the Quranic kindergarten she attended, it was forbidden to draw eyes. The result: She could not assimilate them into her own body schema,” according to Dr. Moez Cherif, a child psychiatrist and resident of the Association for the Defence of Children's Rights.

The kindergarten consists of two classrooms and a reception hall. At the back of the latter is a large square-shaped box, shrouded in black. It is a prototype of the kaaba (Islam's holiest site) and is used to teach children about the pilgrimage to Mecca during Eid Al Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice) by asking them to mimic the actions of pilgrims and repeat the prayer: "Labayka Allahomma, Labayk" (“I answer your call, my God.”)

### **"My Sheikha, I shall wear the niqab from now on"**

Children who attend the Quranic kindergartens we visited do not wear Islamic dress, with a few exceptions, such as this five-year-old girl who told us that her mother forced her to don the hijab at the age of four.

There is no mixing genders in class: girls on one side, and boys on the other. This is the rule in Quranic kindergartens, in line with the Wahhabi doctrine, which prohibits mixing. To go to the toilet to wash their hands before meals, the children have to line up in two queues: one for each sex.

For their part, the teachers arrive in the morning donning the niqab. However, once inside the kindergarten, they must uncover their faces. Once, a little girl of five approached her teacher, who was wearing the niqab and who had just entered, and said, “My Sheikha (the Islamic term for teacher), you know, from now on, I will also wear the niqab, like you, when I leave the house with my mother.” The teacher gave her a smile and kissed her in encouragement.

We met another four-year-old girl at a kindergarten in Ennasr affiliated with the Abdallah Massaoud Islamic Centre. We asked her to draw a picture of her teacher, and she drew the figure of a woman in niqab.

Nevertheless, the teachers in such kindergartens refuse to admit that their clothing and appearance have any effect on the little ones. “Our dress does not disturb the children. They end up getting used to it, especially when we explain to them that this is part of the rules of Islam,” said one teacher we met at a Quranic kindergarten in Tunis, affiliated with the Nour al-Bayan League.

### **An Intensive Religious Education**

“The kindergarten is an extension of the family sphere,” according to Dr. Cherif. “It is its substitute. It is a place that is supposed to facilitate psycho-affective and psychomotor development, where [children] will become aware of their body schema,” he explains. At Quranic kindergartens, parents are promised that their children will receive a solid religious education, while also benefiting from all the advantages of a normal (secular) kindergarten – namely, being in a place where children can play and develop their physical and mental abilities.

But a typical day at the Quranic kindergarten in Ennasr began with reciting morning prayers and recapping verses from the Quran and hadiths learned the previous day. Seated on their little chairs, girls on one side, boys on the other, the children individually or collectively recited passages from the sacred text. Woe to whomever has forgotten what they learned, because the teacher will be firm and censure them sternly. After this, the tutor teaches the children new verses and hadiths, which the young ones must repeat. This first session lasts from 8 to 9.30 am.

A half-an-hour break follows. Then, for the following two hours, the children learn the pronunciation of Quranic verses according to al-Nouraniya rule, until noon. The teacher uses a large board with letters stuck to the wall, and asks the children to read them properly, and then chooses one of them to stand at the board and act as the teacher. The children are then required to read the entire verse or hadith in question.

The Quranic kindergartens pride themselves on the fact that they teach children to read and write Arabic and the proper recitation of the Quran. Moreover, a flyer for the kindergarten Achbal al-Quran [The Cubs of the Quran] in Bizerte, which teaches the rule of Mennat al-Rahmane, read: “After eight months of learning, a three-year old child will be able to read any passage from the Book, with the correct pronunciation rules of the Quran.”

However, early childhood experts believe that children between the ages of three and five should not be learning reading and writing, as this is “the role of primary schools,” says Dr. Cherif. “In our curriculum (approved by the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs), letters are taught to five-year olds, but in graphical form,” notes Soumaya Htira, who has worked as the director of a regular kindergarten in Gabes for 23 years. “At this stage, the child has great energy just waiting to be put to use. We must therefore ensure that it is expressed through psychomotor activities that develop body and mind.” Htira stressed that “the child needs, in this period of its life, to play and move as much as possible, because if it does not do it at this age, then it cannot do it later.”

In the Quranic kindergarten, children are obliged to attend religious lessons for four hours a day, while the pace followed in regular kindergartens is one hour of religious education (including teaching the Quran, hadith, and religious songs). During all this time, the children are required to remain seated in the same position: that of the learner, “which represents a form of violence against it [the child],” Soumaya Htira opined.

Some children, impatient and bored, may grumble and try to move or speak with their peers. But the teachers are firm and strict, and soon expel the disruptive elements from the class.

Under the guise of psychomotor activity, the children (ages three to five) are also taught to perform the Muslim prayer. But in the Muslim religion, this pillar of Islam should be taught only from seven years of age onwards.

In Quranic kindergartens, prayer instruction begins at age three, as if it were a game. But at age four, the children start to actually practice praying in the Muslim way. At one Quranic kindergarten in Menzeh 9, we saw a real mihrab (a space usually present in a mosque that indicates the direction of prayer). One of the teachers told us that it is used by children aged five and upwards to pray.

### **“A Palm Tree in Paradise”**

The education takes place in one direction, without any reflection or critical efforts on behalf of the children. The teacher recites the verse or the hadith, and sometimes writes it on the board, and the child is told to repeat it before learning it by heart.

At the Achbal al-Quran kindergarten in Bizerte, when someone learns quickly or answers questions from the teacher correctly, the latter draws a palm tree for the child on the board. She then tells the children that this is a “palm tree won in paradise.”

It is also worth noting that all vocabulary used in the Quranic kindergartens have religious connotations. For example, to ask permission to speak in class, the children have to say “Muslim, Muslim!” Only this call is answered.

We also noted that at one of the kindergartens we visited, the children were told to recite prayers (inspired by the hadith) for each action they undertook. For instance, to enter the bathroom, they should say: “God, protect me from malice and the malicious,” and when leaving the bathroom, they have to say: “God, forgive me.” To eat, they must repeat: “In the name of God, in the beginning and in the end,” and when finishing a meal: “Thank you God for giving me this to eat, as I would otherwise be powerless to get it”. Finally, before sleeping they are required to say: “In your name, my God, I die, and in your name, I am resurrected”. And when waking up: “Thank you God for resurrecting me after death and to thou shalt be the Resurrection.”

Any child that forgets one of these rites is scolded by the teacher. If a child misbehaves, or just complains about one of his comrades, the teacher is there to remind him of the hadith: “The gossipier shall not enter Paradise.”

Besides prayers and the hadiths, the children are also required to learn songs of a religious or moralising nature. These songs are played without music or percussion, as both are prohibited in the Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine. Only vocals are allowed.

The teachers download the songs from special websites. The content generally celebrates the virtues of Islam and urges supporting the faith against its enemies, even by means of jihad. "My son often sang a song where the words said: My grandfather is Saladin and I shall go fight in Palestine," said Sihem Jabar. Listening to her four-year-old boy repeat this kind of message prompted her to take him out of a Quranic kindergarten in Manouba. In addition, some songs convey outdated values, such as "my mother is a housewife."

There is also the teaching of morals and dogma underpinning the stories taken from Muslim tradition, mostly about the Prophet and his companions. "The stories that you (the teachers) must read to the children should be taken from the Quran or should evoke the stories of the messengers of God and companions of the Prophet," proclaimed our instructor during the training session.

Finally, there is the afternoon session (from 2 to 4 pm), which is reserved for teaching math, scientific awareness, languages (French or English), and drawing. Here the religious instruction is never far away either. At a Quranic kindergarten that we visited, the teacher asked a three-year-old girl to draw an arrow linking correct answers in a science awareness textbook: "With which hand should we eat?" The girl answered, "With the right hand," and her classmate added: "Only Satan eats with the left hand."

In another exercise, the children were asked to colour in the correct answer to the question: "Where should a girl wear the veil: Over or under her head?" This is of course without forgetting that the images to be coloured have featureless faces. When we inquired about the origin of these textbooks, we were told that they had been downloaded from specialised Islamic sites accessible on the internet.

Even the teaching of mathematics did not escape the intrusion of religion. "I teach them mathematics by asking them to count the number of verses in a sura [chapter of the Quran], and then I require them to write every verse according to the number that corresponds to it," said one teacher at a Quranic kindergarten.

### **The "Preacher-teacher" and the "Child-Leader"**

In the Quranic kindergartens, there is a lot of focus on making the children aware of their responsibility and ensuring that they behave like adults. The objective is to create leaders. "The good teacher is one who manages to educate child-leaders," our instructor notes. Furthermore, in the flyer advertising the Achbal al-Quran kindergarten in Bizerte, the objectives state: "To educate a godly generation and develop the personality of the Muslim child, to shine in all areas and be proud of its religion."

Hence, children are asked to mimic the Muslim prayer during the celebration of the end of the year, as we saw in a video showing the end-of-year celebration at the Baraem Abdullah Massoud kindergarten in Ennasr, posted on its Facebook page. The same goes for the Muslim Friday sermon, as children from the age of five are trained to hold the sermon in preparation for the end-of-year festival, where they are required to perform on stage, as though in a theatre play, in front of their parents.

The children play the role of the Friday imam, surrounded by their classmates. One child recites the sermon, which the teacher gave it to learn by heart, and must imitate the gestures and serious tone of the imam at the mosque.

The teachers do not consider themselves mere educators, but also bearers of a sacred mission. “The preacher-teacher must consider her job to be like a sacred mission and not a profession, because she is doing the work of the prophets and messengers of God who transport people from the world of ignorance to the world of knowledge and faith. It is her who shows the path to Allah,” the instructor explained during the training session.

The role of the teacher is not limited to educating the children, but also extends to the parents, by encouraging the youngsters to proselytise to their parents and “bring them back to the right path.”

“My five-year-old son insisted that I perform the [Muslim] prayer and recite the same prayers he learned at the kindergarten,” said Wassila. In addition, a teacher at a Quranic kindergarten in Kairouan happily recounted the story of a boy who was able to convince his alcoholic father to stop drinking, which is forbidden according to Islam, and to observe the prayer.

### **The Parents Fall Into the Trap**

The parents who choose to enroll their children in Quranic kindergartens are not necessarily religious people. Many of them are modern people with a secular mentality. At the various institutions we managed to visit, we saw parents who are doctors, executives in companies, lawyers, and even military officers.

So why do they opt for such places?

“By putting my son in a Quranic kindergarten, I thought that the staff would take better care of him, because they would be God-fearing individuals. In addition, I was happy that they were teaching him the Quran,” said Sihem Jabar, who is a working mother.

A teacher at a Quranic kindergarten in Ennasr said: “One day, in the beginning of the year, a hypermodern woman, wearing a tank top, came to register her son. When asked about the reason for her choice, she said that she had confidence in us and that we were going to treat him well, because she felt that we were devout people.”

Some parents have had bad experiences with abuse and mistreatment in normal kindergartens, and thus decided to give kindergartens with a Quranic character a try. Little did they know that they were signing their children up for a very oriented education, if not outright indoctrination. The selling point touted the most to lure in parents is that the children will learn by heart whole sections of the Quran, recited in the proper way, in addition to receiving an education that is compliant with Islam.

Sihem recalls that when she went to enroll her son Adam at a Quranic kindergarten in Manouba, she was promised the moon and stars: “Your boy will learn Arabic and a good part of the Quran. And even later in primary school, he will benefit from our follow-up, so that when he is 11, he will be able to recite the entire sacred text by heart,” she was told. “This is of course the desire of every mother,” she added.

It is very difficult to resist such an offer in a society that is at a want for values and which overwhelmingly voted for Islamist parties (41 percent in the elections of 23 October 2011).

Habiba al-Mili, director of a regular kindergarten in Monastir, recounted how a parent “came to remove his son from this kindergarten and place him in a different one of the Quranic variety, because he found out that we played music for the children, which could, according to him, lead to debauchery.”

“The Tunisians go for the Quranic kindergartens because they are thirsty for religion, especially since, during the two decades of Ben Ali’s rule, he squeezed out anything that has to do with religion, under the pretext of fighting terrorism,” said Ms. Nabiha Tlili, President of the National Chamber of Kindergartens and Nurseries, in UTICA (Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Crafts).

But what they do not tell the parents are the possible consequences of such a strict education. “What happens in these places is that the child is taught a single mindset, closing his mind to the world. The child is taught that there is only good and evil, eliminating all other nuances and inculcating in him the idea that everything that does not resemble him is to be shunned,” Dr. Cherif explained.

### **Lower Prices**

A further motivation for parents to place their children in Quranic kindergartens is that the fees are lower than their regular counterparts. This is deliberate to attract more customers, particularly among disadvantaged social classes that do not have the means to send their children elsewhere.

In a country where the supply rate for preschool is about 34 percent of actual demand, according to the latest figures from the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs (published in 2013), it is clear that it is not within the reach of all Tunisians to place their children in early childhood care and education (ECCE). Quranic kindergartens thus play a role in filling this void.

Wassila, for example, benefited from a discount for placing her son in a Quranic kindergarten in Manouba, given her difficult financial situation. Sihem, for her part, paid 75 dinars per month for a Quranic kindergarten. When she placed her son in a normal institution in the same region (Mabouba), the fees rose to 100 dinars per month. Further inland in the country, Quranic kindergartens charge as little as 20 dinars per month.

But if the Quranic kindergartens can afford to charge lower prices, this is because, first and foremost, they do not pay any taxes or social security contributions for their staff, who are not declared to the government. As illegal enterprises, they are not subject to the monitoring of the Labor Inspectorate, nor the Ministry of Finance.

“While we, owners of legal kindergartens, have to pay fees for social security and taxes, the Quranic institutions do not pay anything,” Ms. Tlili says with apparent bitterness, adding that “Tunisian law prohibits associations regardless of their nature, to engage in activities for profit.” Moreover, Article 4 of Decree-Law 88 (dated 24 September 2011) states: “Associations are prohibited from engaging in commercial activities in order to distribute money to their members to serve personal interests, or use the association for financial fraud.”

## **An Activity that Breaks the Law**

The Quranic kindergartens, which were mostly established by religious associations after the Revolution, have long refused to comply with the law and to place themselves under the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs, and adopt the specifications that regulate the activity of kindergartens in Tunisia.

To circumvent the laws in force and evade control by the Ministry, the owners of Quranic institutions use loopholes. One such loophole concerns the founding statutes for the religious associations under which the kindergartens operate: they state that the latter offer to teach the Quran to “all ages.” No law prevents that.

This way, their activities no longer fall under the umbrella of the Ministry for Women, which only oversees the preschool sector. Consequently, when inspectors appointed by the Ministry in question visit one of these kindergartens, they are told that they are undesirables and are kicked out. Incidents of this kind have been reported several times.

To address the problem, the Ministry, as a first step, appealed to Child Protection Agency delegates to accompany the inspectors. The delegates, whose mission is to protect children against all kinds of threats, are entitled to intervene by law, in the event that there are signs of danger, anywhere. It is impossible to deny them access, and they were thus able to go enter the Quranic kindergartens and check what is happening inside.

However, they ran into another problem. Indeed, Article 20 of the Child Protection Code defines seven cases of threats that would require the intervention of child protection delegates – and indoctrination is not one of them.

“All I can do is remove a child from the Quranic kindergarten and ask his parents to place him in another institution,” said Anis Aounallah, Child Protection delegate in Tunis. “In regards to whether a kindergarten conforms with the specifications, this does not fall under my purview,” he added. Aounallah vowed that he had taken the matter up with the juvenile court judge to request the closure of these enterprises, but that the case went nowhere because there were no clear menaces to the children in accordance with the Child Protection Code.

## **A Young Girl Is Raped: The Turning Point**

It took the uncovering of the case of a three-year-old girl who was raped last March by the caretaker at her kindergarten in Marsa, for the government to take new measures to regulate the sector and crack down on illegal kindergartens. The affair shed light on the lack of regulation in the kindergarten sector.

It should be recalled that in Tunisia, there are 4,005 legal and around 702 illegal kindergartens, according to the latest census conducted by the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs this year. But according to the chairperson of the National Chamber of Kindergartens and Nurseries, Ms. Nabiha Tlili, the real number is almost three times higher.

The spotlight on Quranic kindergartens has further complicated the situation for a sector already afflicted by poor organisation, and that has been invaded by interlopers.

Three ministerial meetings were held to tackle the issue of illegal enterprises (e.g. Quranic and other illegal kindergartens), in November 2012, March 2013 and April 2013. It was decided to issue a circular authorising the closure of kindergartens that do not abide by the law.

But the circular has yet to be published. Despite this, the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs already launched a campaign to close illegal kindergartens in May 2013. So far, 170 enterprises have had their activities suspended by the regional authorities. Regarding Quranic kindergartens, notices of closure have been issued against eleven enterprises.

### **The Nour al-Bayan League Raises Its Voice**

These decisions did not fail to draw the ire of the owners of Quranic kindergartens, including Hamdi al-Ghanmi, president of the Nour al-Bayan League – a religious organisation that operates 12 Quranic kindergartens. Unlike those in charge of other Quranic kindergartens, which eventually decided to comply with the law, al-Ghanmi did not want to adopt the specifications of the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs, because this would entail having to implement the government curriculum. For one thing, he prefers to keep his current curriculum, which is imported from Saudi Arabia.

“By what right does the Ministry for Women want to compel us to adopt its curriculum? We cannot accept its specifications, which make no reference whatsoever to Islam. By what right does it want to raise our children in its own way?” said al-Ghanmi indignantly during a September 20 sit-in he had called for outside the government headquarters, to protest against the decision to close institutions affiliated with the Nour al-Bayan League.

At this sit-in, he mobilised parents, staff, but also children, who were dressed in their kindergarten uniform, carrying placards with slogans such as: “Take your hands off our children and let us raise them as we want” and “Mom and dad chose to put me in the Nour al-Bayan kindergarten, so do not deprive me of it.”

To attract more sympathy from pedestrians and rally public opinion to their cause, the sit-in organisers brought a megaphone and handed it to the children who recited the Quran and prayers they learned at the Quranic kindergartens.

But what the president of the Nour al-Bayan League did not say is that his operations amount to a real business. Indeed, the kindergartens operating under his supervision, or those that want to use his group’s name to launch Quranic institutions, have to pay a percentage of their earnings to the League. This percentage could rise to 60 percent, according to a teacher at one Quranic kindergarten.

The Nour al-Bayan League has even invested in primary education, establishing its own private elementary school, al-Malak Assaghir (‘Little Angel’). The school has been open since September 2012, in Menzah 9. It currently offers an education dominated by religious instruction for students in the first and second years of primary school, with plans to accommodate other levels in the future.

## **“Private Kouttabs”**

As he is unwilling to comply with the specifications of the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs, al-Ghanmi prefers to operate under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, since the Nour al-Bayan League is a religious association. He is determined to follow this track, especially since this Ministry manages a segment of ECCE institutions known as kouttabs. These are traditional institutions for teaching the Quran, which were granted legal status by the government in 2001. They implement a modernised curriculum, and teach other subject matters necessary for the psychomotor development of the child. In truth, the 1,300 kouttabs that currently exist in Tunisia are all under state control.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has been engaged in dialogue with religious organisations operating Quranic kindergartens, since the time of the late Ahmed Bargaoui, the former head of the associations division at the Ministry. The minister had decided to develop specifications governing the establishment of “private kouttabs.” He stated: “The aim is to give a chance to the Quranic kindergartens that refuse to adopt the specifications of the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs, because its curriculum was far from their beliefs.”

But this project remains on standby for now. Meanwhile, following continuous demands from religious associations, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is studying the idea of taking control of the curriculums at Quranic kindergartens, since it considers itself the party most qualified to evaluate these, while leaving all administrative and procedural aspects (i.e. the criteria for establishing a kindergarten, staff, location, etc.) to the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs.

The Islamist-leaning government is thus not seeking to outlaw Quranic kindergartens, nor even to curtail them. Instead, its aim is to contain them and find a legal framework in which they can operate freely without disturbance, and even to create a parallel system. “The Ministry of Religious Affairs refused to close the Quranic kindergartens on the basis of their religious character,” said Ali al-Lafi, policy and communications advisor for the Minister of Religious Affairs.

For her part, the Minister for Women and Family Affairs, Sihem Badi, said at a press conference on 27 September 2013, that the Ministry “has no objection to the opening of Quranic kindergartens, provided they comply with the law.”

Now, the religious associations have their eyes set on primary education: creating parallel private institutions. After Nour al-Bayan, the Abdullah Massoud Islamic Centre also plans to build a school to be named “The School of the Child Leader.”

The same applies to the representatives of Ennouraniya in Tunisia, who, according to one employee at Ennouraniya’s office, are planning to build thirteen primary schools across the country.

The ambivalent strategy adopted by the government in dealing with religious associations may thus allow them to spread and flourish, and alter the Tunisian social landscape in the long run.