

ISSUE BRIEF **04.30.18**

The Reconfiguration of Ennahdha's Recruitment Strategy in Tunisia

Maryam Ben Salem, Ph.D., University of Sousse, Tunisia

Currently, Ennahdha presents itself as a conservative political party. In its 10th congress in June 2016, the party announced that it had adopted a specialization policy (*takhasus*) that formally separates its preaching and political activities. Islam is no longer considered to be a total political project as expressed in the slogan "*al islam din wa dawla*" ("Islam is religion and state"), but rather, a system of ethical values that guides the policy choices of Ennahdha in the economic, political, and social arenas.

This brief¹ will discuss Ennahdha's ideological renewal through the prism of recent changes in the party's recruitment procedures. Ennahdha membership has grown from an estimated 10,000 adherents in the 1990s to about 100,000 today for several reasons. The party ranks grew significantly following the end of Ben Ali regime, as the political costs of Ennahdha affiliation were no longer high. Likewise, the party has adopted a policy of openness (*infitah*) that removed various recruitment criteria that once limited its activist base. Given these changes, I ask the following: what are the effects of these changes on Ennahdha's party identity? How might such changes in recruitment practices affect party members' relationship with and loyalty to Ennahdha? In answering these questions, I will comparatively analyze Ennahdha's former and present-day recruitment procedures.

THE FORMER RECRUITMENT PROCESS

At its inception in the early 1970s, Ennahdha's recruitment process featured an initiation phase as its central element. During this phase, religiosity was a primary concern for membership and a key dimension of a neophyte's identity. This phase consisted of three stages: 1) the circle stage (*halaqa*) corresponded to a period of initial religious learning activity; 2) the open cell stage (*osra maftouha*) was for political skills acquisition and activist identity-building; and 3) the closed cell (*osra moghlaqa*) stage featured integration into the group as a full member, with an oath of allegiance. These three stages—fundamental to the process of conversion to Ennahdha's Islamist ideology—touched on both an entry into the sacred and a desacralization of activist motivations.

There were two main paths in the initiation phase: preaching or political action. The supervisor (*mushrif*) assumed a critical role in this process; he was tasked with discovering a neophyte's skills and predilection for a religious or political path. While some activists worked in mosques and engaged in social action, others were active at college campuses and in student groups. Political activism became especially prevalent with the second generation of Ennahdha activists who had gained experience at university campuses throughout the 1980s. This distinction is also critical to better understand the contemporary divisions



The Ennahdha party separated its preaching and political activities in 2016. Islam is now considered a system of ethical values that guides the party's policy choices in the economic, political, and social arenas.

Ennahdha as a political party will no longer oversee religious activities. The new policy is part of the movement's survival strategy in a new political context.

within the party, i.e., to move beyond the idea of a simple dichotomy between radicals and moderates in Ennahdha. The training received by the older generation of members focused on their political-religious qualifications and the internalization of the group's motivation. It was up to the *murshid* to define the mission to which the activist would commit, to recognize the specific aptitude required to fulfill the mission, and to proceed with a specific form of social and cultural activism in order to uphold the group's Islamist ideology.

A key component of the initiation process was the notion of elevation (*istiqla*). This was intended to differentiate an Ennahdha initiate from the masses: "Our mission is to distinguish ourselves and to carry the flame for those lost in the meanders of the Earth and the labyrinths of deserts."² The initiate had to consider himself/herself superior by standing out from the masses, rejecting their values, and proving his/her distinction. The idea of elevation implied a total break with a society that was regarded as impious. This concept of society thus opens the way to a process of communalization in the Weberian sense—a subjective feeling of belonging to a distinctive community. In this regard, a separation from broader society reflects the prophet's exile (*hijra*) to Medina in 622, following conflicts with unbelievers in Mecca. This exile constitutes the core "mobilizing utopian construction" of the Muslim world, according to French historian Maxime Rodinson.³ During the initial phase, the reference to the prophet's life served several functions: it allowed the neophyte to grasp the importance of action to transform the world, to undertake such actions and conform to the will of God, and to confer sacredness to the actions.

The context in which the early Ennahdha generations evolved necessitated the use of secrecy. Secrecy served a dual function: protection against repression under the regimes of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and the formation of forces capable of opposition. Secrecy also strengthens the demarcation between the insider and the outsider, thereby serving a valorization function. Knowing what the outsider does not is a source of pride and distinction

for the Islamist insider. Likewise, secrecy performs a group identification function. The exclusivism generated by secrecy implies a sense of belonging to a distinct group that is composed of qualified people united by their beliefs and ideology.

This cult of distinction—grounded in the principle of adherence to Islam and rooted in religious qualification—diminished over time in favor of the more material rewards generated by activism, such as official positions within the group or access to patronage.

A POLICY OF OPENNESS

The policy of openness (*al-infithah*) adopted by Ennahdha fundamentally altered the party's recruitment process. This policy is a direct consequence of its specialization policy. The core of the specialization policy is that Ennahdha as a political party will no longer oversee religious activities (i.e., preaching and sermons in mosques, or through civil society organizations). While members are free to participate in religious activities as individuals, any member holding an elected office or a leadership position within the party cannot simultaneously hold a leadership position within a religious organization or engage in preaching.

Many factors contributed to Ennahdha's adoption of the specialization policy. First, the main argument in favor of specialization was that a dictatorship—and the threat it posed to religious freedoms—was no longer in power. The Arab-Muslim identity was no longer in peril, as was the case under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. According to party officials,⁴ Ennahdha's previous demands for the Islamization of state and society were the result of restrictions placed on political parties. However, re-Islamization is no longer pertinent given the renewed religiosity in Tunisia since the 2000s. Hence, Hamadi Jebali, a former Ennahdha leader, and head of government under the troika,⁵ declared that he was delighted to see that Ennahdha's dream of lifting the ban on the veil was realized without the party's help. Indeed, the resurgence of religiosity in Tunisia began in the 2000s under the influence of Arab satellite television channels. Apparent signs of

this development include massive attendance at mosques and, as mentioned earlier, the wearing of the veil by women.⁶ Moreover, while the 2014 constitution guarantees religious freedoms, it clearly states that Islam is the religion of the Tunisian state. As such, Ennahdha has access to the democratic process to influence policy choices, including those that counter the party's vision of Islam, according to party officials.

A second argument for specialization is that Ennahdha's current political challenge involves its ability to propose viable solutions to Tunisia's political and economic problems. Yet the responses and policies proposed and adopted by the party must also conform to Islam to the extent possible. A bill on Awqaf in October 2013 is a case in point.⁷ Although the bill, which aimed to resurrect the institution of Awqaf, has not been adopted by the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), it remains a priority for Ennahdha because of its symbolic significance in Islamic law.⁸ For Islamist activists who have long been immersed in Islamist ideology and for whom religion is a part of their identity, such symbolic acts of Islamic idealism will continue to be part of their political discourse.

Third, specialization policy is part of the movement's survival strategy in a new political context. While maintaining its presence in the social and religious fields, the movement protects itself from accusations that it is using Islam for electoral purposes.

NEW ENTRY PROCEDURES: A DECREASE OF LOYALTY?

As explained earlier, party mobilization expanded in the mid-1980s. Recruitment and initiation procedures were relaxed due to the expansion of Ennahdha and its activist base. Members were integrated without always going through the first level of the organizational hierarchy. Nonetheless, social control mechanisms remained strong. The new entrants were supervised by their predecessors in the areas of ideological transformation, knowledge of Islamist doctrine, and appropriate social behavior. At the same time, the hardships suffered and

the sacrifices made for the Islamist cause contributed to an unflagging loyalty to the movement and a great sense of solidarity among its members.

The specialization policy fundamentally altered the party's recruitment process. Since the policy's adoption, Ennahdha's stated goal is to function only as a political party in which membership is no longer exclusive to those who share the same political-religious ethos. New members must, in principle, be exclusively interested in political work. This entails, then, the end of exclusivism, i.e., the policy of reserving entry into Ennahdha to those who have been initiated; it also creates the need to open the party to all who share Ennahdha's vision, whether Muslim or not. Indeed, political competition demands the broadening of the party's electoral base.

Membership in Ennahdha today follows conventional methods of political party recruitment. A prospective member need only apply for membership in order to obtain his/her membership card and gain voting rights within the party; nonetheless, an introduction by an existing member of the party remains *de rigueur*. The application for membership is only accepted if an Ennahdha member testifies to the character and integrity of the applicant. The new recruit must go through a probationary period of one year before he or she is eligible for positions of responsibility at the local level, and two years before he or she is eligible for positions at the central level. An academy primarily catering to young members has been set up to train new recruits. The trainers in the academy are Tunisian and foreign experts in communication and other skills, as opposed to being party activists. The religious component of recruitment has thus been abandoned in favor of training in areas such as communication, diplomacy, economics, political regimes, and electoral systems. Fifty-two members were involved in the first year of the program, which was launched in July 2017; the second class (February 2018) had around 200 people. New party members who joined between 2011 and 2017 were therefore not a part of the new training program. As a result, there is a great level of heterogeneity among party members and a shift toward the new

Compared to older members, new members are less intensely engaged in party activities. The fully committed activist who sacrificed his private life and studies, and who took risks for the Islamist cause, has given way to the distant activist who does not hesitate to turn his back on the party at the slightest disagreement.

While the elders still dominate the party and have managed to maintain control of it, new members are bound to eventually become the party majority and eventually overtake the decision-making positions within the party.

members' ideas of what the party is and should stand for. Indeed, some discomfort is felt among the older members, especially those who entered the party with the ambition to assume positions of power or to benefit from the political protection that a party in power could offer. Due to the recruitment changes, some view Ennahdha as a new Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD)—a party to distribute aid, patronage, and favors of all kinds.

Compared to older members, new members are less intensely engaged in party activities. The fully committed activist who sacrificed his private life and studies, and who took risks for the Islamist cause has given way to the distant activist who does not hesitate to turn his back on the party in the case of the slightest disagreement, and who voices dissent or only participates in elections. This shift reflects not only societal changes but also a weakening of the group's solidarity and attachment to the cause. Disengagement, therefore, has become easier; shared experiences that once provoked excitement or were sources of pain no longer define Ennahdha membership. One member noted:

If I am in conflict with one of the brothers [the older ones], it will not alter our relationship because there are strong links between us. However, the only link between us and the new member is the membership card. We have no idea if he understands or not our ideal Islamic repository [shared values and practices].⁹

WHAT LIES AHEAD

Despite radical changes to Ennahdha recruitment, membership is not entirely open. The first wave of new Ennahdha entrants was primarily composed of movement sympathizers, especially those related to an existing member of Ennahdha who were unable to join during the Ben Ali regime; however, this wave lacked social diversity. Ennahdha continues to recruit from the conservative, petite bourgeoisie and the lower socioeconomic classes, both of which mirror the traditional Islamist profile in Tunisia. The conservatism cultivated by the middle class and those

who live in rural areas, and which most Islamists support, favors the return of traditional values such as modesty, gender segregation, and chastity. As a result, Ennahdha's newly proclaimed conservative party identity is likely to resonate among new entrants. Yet neither the party's new identity nor its strategy satisfies everyone within the party. A party official stated:

For the moment, we are not yet able to recruit members or to collect votes in a district like yours [District of Menzah],¹⁰ either because we are seen as too conservative or because we have not done enough to achieve it ... We did not conduct a rational and pragmatic reading of the electoral map. We risk losing everything if we seek to broaden our electoral base by addressing very different groups and using contradictory discourses.¹¹

Moreover, a kind of ostracism still exists within Ennahdha. For instance, a smoker will face discrimination in a subtle way, even if the party rules do not sanction exclusionary practices based on personal behavior. Despite higher levels of heterogeneity among the rank and file, informal control over the morality of new members and the selection process of party officials leads to a relatively homogenous and more conservative party leadership.

While significant changes have taken place in the party's recruitment strategy, the extent of their impact—as far as Ennahdha's move away from political Islam is concerned—remains unclear. Although the party has instituted measures to signal changes, it remains timid and often imbued in ambivalence. This ambivalence is particularly visible in the conflict between the party's admittance of non-Muslims and non-Islamists on one hand, and its emphasis on Islamic references and strong morality on the other hand. It leads us to believe that the changing political and social context in Tunisia necessitated the newly instituted changes, especially following Ennahdha's lackluster performance in the seat of power.

If we take seriously the assertion by Tunisian political and intellectual elites that the specialization policy is merely a decoy to allow Ennahdha to continue functioning

in the religious sphere, the strategy appears to be unsustainable because the transformations at work in party recruitment will alter the party's activist base in the long-term. While the elders still dominate the party and have managed to maintain control, new members are bound to eventually become the party majority and eventually overtake the decision-making positions. This strategy could portend a radical transformation of Ennahdha into a secular party in the long-term unless it manages to do one of two things: 1) maintain a bridge between members from different generations so that older members can transfer their vision for Islamic activism to the younger members, or 2) retain control over preaching and the social and charitable activism of its base. Provided that the party has anchored itself politically and socially in the specialization policy, the odds for the successful implementation of either of these two options remain low.

ENDNOTES

1. This brief is based on the data produced by a qualitative survey conducted between 2006 and 2013 with members of Ennahdha for my Ph.D. thesis. See Maryam Ben Salem, "Le militantisme en contexte répressif. Cas du mouvement islamiste tunisien [Militantism in a Repressive Context. The Case of the Tunisian Islamist Movement]," Ph.D. thesis in political science under the direction of Daniel Gaxie, Panthéon-Sorbonne Université, 2013. It is also based on the preparatory work for a new research project I am engaged in (interviews conducted in January 2018 with eight leaders of Ennahdha).

2. Sayyid Qutb (our translation). سيد قطب، نحو مجتمع إسلامي، القاهرة، مصر، الطبعة العاشرة، دار الشروق 1993م، ص 12-13.

3. Maxime Rodinson, *L'islam: politique et croyance* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

4. Personal interviews with Abdelhamid Jelassi, Mohamed Gueloui, Ridha Driss, Ridha Barouni, Fethi Ayadi, and Ridha Saidi, January 2018.

5. Troika refers to the coalition government formed by the Ennahdha,

Congress for the Republic, and Ettakatol parties in December 2011.

6. Maryam Ben Salem, "Le voile islamique en Tunisie. La réalisation de soi entre traditionalisme et modernité," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée REMMM* 128 (2010): 61-77. Maryam Ben Salem et François Gauthier, "Téléprédication et port du voile en Tunisie," *Social Compass, Special issue: Religion in a Consumer Society*, 58 no. 3 (2011): 323-330.

7. The institution of Awqaf was liquidated in the aftermath of independence. It is defined as "Holding certain property and preserving it for the confined benefit of certain philanthropy and prohibiting any use or disposition of it outside that specific objective." See M. Kahf, "Waqf: A Quick Overview," February 3, 2015, retrieved from kahf.net at http://monzer.kahf.com/papers/english/WAQF_A_QUICK_OVERVIEW.pdf.

8. Personal interview with Ridha Saidi, who was in charge of Ennahdha's planning and studies section, January 2018.

9. Author interview with Mohamed Gueloui, January 2018.

10. In the 2011 and 2014 elections, Ennahdha fared poorly in the District of Menzah, in the Tunis Governorate.

11. Personal interview with Abdelhamid Jelassi, January 2018.

AUTHOR

Maryam Ben Salem, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in political science at the University of Sousse in Tunisia. She is also an associate fellow at the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research and the vice-president of the Association Tunisienne D'études Politiques. Ben Salem's research focuses on political Islam and political participation. She obtained a degree in political science from Saint Joseph University in Beirut and her Ph.D. in political science from Panthéon-Sorbonne Université.

center for the
MIDDLE EAST

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This issue brief is part of a two-year research project on pluralism in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. The project is generously supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

See more issue briefs at:
www.bakerinstitute.org/issue-briefs

This publication was written by a researcher (or researchers) who participated in a Baker Institute project. Wherever feasible, this research is reviewed by outside experts before it is released. However, the views expressed herein are those of the individual author(s), and do not necessarily represent the views of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

© 2018 Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Cite as:

Ben Salem, Maryam. 2018. *The Reconfiguration of Ennahdha's Recruitment Strategy in Tunisia*. Issue brief no. 04.30.18. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.