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A Doomed Relationship: Ennahdha and Salafism

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INTRODUCTION

Having weathered a period of volatility after President Ben Ali's sudden downfall, Tunisia's main political and social actors saw in the mechanisms of a procedural democracy the solution to their ideological and organizational problems. This coincided with the will of the majority of Tunisians and the hopes of the international community for the country's stability. Yet success in this process has led to the marginalization and exclusion of Salafism¹—which represented a considerable number of Tunisia's marginalized youth—from the public sphere.

Building on fieldwork carried out in 2015 and 2017, this brief provides an overview of the complex relationship between Ennahdha² and Tunisian Salafism, and explains why and how Ennahdha “betrayed” its Salafist constituency. We argue that while Ennahdha's actions have had positive consequences for the stabilization of Tunisia's political system and contributed to reducing the perceived polarization between Islamists and laics, they have also prevented Salafi associations and groups to voice legitimate grievances through radical discourse and actions within a clear legal framework (Merone 2017).

Relatively speaking, the issue of Salafism remains on the margins of current debates on Tunisian politics. However, it is a central concern for the evolution of the country's relationship between religion and politics for several reasons. The official ban on Salafist discourses and practices that came into effect in the summer of 2013 led

to the retreat of many young people from various forms of political participation. While it is difficult to measure how large this contingent is, there is evidence to suggest that young people in Tunisia under 30 years of age are not as invested in elections and electoral politics as their counterparts in other states transitioning to democracy, such as South Africa in the early 1990s. For instance, the voter turnout for young people decreased 11 percentage points between Tunisia's 2011 and 2014 elections (Yerkes 2017). While many young Salafis might have other reasons not to participate in electoral politics, such as ideological ones, their marginalization and official exclusion from social and political activism nonetheless compounds the problem of low youth interest in Tunisia's formal political process. At the peak of Salafi mobilization in 2011 and 2012, up to 30,000 people—mostly young men—participated in the Kairouan annual congress of the largest Salafi movement in the country.

Similarly, democratic consolidation has yet to deal with the causes that led to the rise of Salafism in the first place. Salafism is considered both an expression of socio-economic malaise and a tool of revolutionary mobilization that has a far greater political dimension than one that is strictly religious or doctrinal. The majority of Salafis in Tunisia were active in Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafist movement with clear jihadi and revolutionary undertones that adapted to a transitional situation specific to Tunisia. Another movement, Political Salafism, emerged quickly in 2011 after



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the fall of Ben Ali and attempted to make inroads in parliament, but failed to mobilize enough supporters to gain any elected seats. A third movement, quietist Salafism (also referred to as scientific Salafism), built on the institutions and networks that had emerged in the later years of the Ben Ali regime, positioning itself as an intermediary between the state and revolutionary Salafism. Its success was modest, however, and revolutionary Salafis labeled quietist sheikhs and scholars as “Salafi lights” to suggest that they did not have a genuine attachment to a radical interpretation of the faith and the politics derived from it.

THE SALAFISTS' AGENDA FOR POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA

The quietist form of Salafism that originated during Ben Ali's regime was tolerated by the authorities for two reasons: From an ideological standpoint, quietist Salafism favored the political status quo and did not constitute a challenge to the regime. From a more pragmatic perspective, the regime wanted to increase its religious legitimacy and respond to popular demands for a greater role of religion in society (Personal communication with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017; Zeghal 2013; Haugbølle 2015) without permitting a politicized form of it. Quietist Salafism is apolitical; therefore, it appealed to the Ben Ali regime. Similar decisions to tolerate and even encourage quietist Salafism were made in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria during the 2000s.

Historically, Salafism has been divided in terms of its relationship to institutional politics and how the goal of the Islamic state should be achieved (Wiktorowicz 2006). Revolutionary and politicized Salafi groups emerged in Tunisia in the aftermath of the general amnesty law³ adopted on February 19, 2011. The new public freedoms, together with the return of Ennahdha to political prominence, represented an opportunity for Salafi groups to mobilize and play a long-denied public role through the creation of civil society associations, political parties, and individual initiatives (Cavatorta 2015). Salafis of all ideological

persuasions were motivated to act—to avoid passively witnessing what they perceived could be the descent of post-revolutionary Tunisia into a state based on un-Islamic democratic pillars and corrupt morals (Grami 2014). The Salafis' mobilization and activism reflected their ideological leanings. During the elected assembly's work to draft a new constitution, Salafis pushed their agenda for a post-revolutionary Tunisia: a redefinition of *tunisianité*—or national identity—that included a major role for Islam (Merone 2014). This would be achieved by recognizing sharia as the sole source of legislation in the new constitution: “we have the Quran and the *sunna* that give us an alternative: with our religion we can dominate the world, just like we used to in the past” (Merone 2013). In their vision, sharia would halt corruption and redistribute wealth: “where there is sharia, there is a complete program—no more divisions, injustice” (Marks 2013). Salafi groups used top-down (institutional changes) and bottom-up (societal changes) strategies similar to those employed by the more traditional Islamist movements during the 1980s and 1990s (Roy 1992). The main goal was the Salafization of society through *dawa* (proselytizing).

In the early stages of the transition to democracy, it seemed that the Salafis would handle “street politics” to generate support for a greater role of religion in guiding public policies, while Ennahdha would take care of “institutional politics” to lay the groundwork to legally take over the country. This was a popular interpretation of Islamist politics among secular, nationalist commentators and politicians (Sayah 2012). Yet it was a fundamental misreading of both the Salafis—particularly Ansar al-Sharia—and Ennahdha, as their relationship was much more complex and conflicted.

Initially, Salafis lacked political representation in the National Constituent Assembly because no Salafi party was registered to participate in the 2011 legislative elections, and no independent candidates from the government-legalized Jabhat Al-Islah⁴ were elected. In the Salafis' search for a powerful ally against secular parties, it seemed that Ennahdha could fill the role, particularly through its

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more conservative and traditionalist wing represented by MPs such as Sadok Chourou and Habib Ellouze (International Crisis Group 2013). At the same time (according to a personal interview with a former Ennahdha MP), Ennahdha was trying to broaden its voter base and to delegate tasks it could not perform as a major, credible elected political party—tasks such as filling the streets with young men demanding “the impossible,” i.e., the creation of a sharia-based Islamic state (Cavatorta 2015). Accordingly, we observe that both Ennahdha and Salafis professing a range of ideologies had interests that coincided, and they worked together to an extent for what appear to be different ends. In other words, both ostensibly had a common objective (the Islamization of the state through sharia), seemed to belong to the same ideological family, and played a complementary role in post-revolutionary Tunisia. In reality, Ennahdha wanted as many votes and as much support as it could gather outside the assembly in order to negotiate from a position of strength with the elected representatives of secular ideologies, all the while being fully aware that the most radical Islamist demands would never be accepted by its prospective institutional partners. For its part, Ansar al-Sharia wanted institutional and political outcomes that were often at odds with the will of the majority of Tunisians and were ultimately unpalatable to Rachid Ghannouchi’s party.

Joint participation in various activities such as demonstrations, political meetings, Ansar al-Sharia gatherings, and religious conferences reinforced the perception of a close relationship between Salafis and Ennahdha. For example, a large demonstration on March 16, 2012, featured various Islamist actors: “political” Salafis from Jabhat Al-Islah (Zelin 2012b); Ennahdha members, including MPs Sahbi Atig and Habib Ellouze; representatives from the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations; and quietist Salafis (Radio-Canada 2012; AFP 2012). Ghannouchi attended the founding congress of Jabhat Al-Islah; likewise, he attended two Ansar al-Sharia official gatherings, along with fellow party members Sadok Chourou and Habib Ellouze. The latter two were also present during a conference

featuring Mohamed Hassan, a controversial Egyptian preacher (Business News 2013). These examples underscore the fact that Salafis attempted to be closer to Ennahdha irrespective of whether they recognized the legitimacy of involvement in formal politics.

While the narrative regarding the close relationship between mainstream Islamists and Salafis is certainly an important aspect of the transition to democracy in Tunisia, it tends to misrepresent the goals of both Ennahdha and the Salafis. Ennahdha’s strategy of inclusion was based on the idea that Salafis should take part in the transitional process in order to moderate the Salafis’ discourses through interactions with political movements of different political persuasions (personal interview with a former member of Ennahdha’s politburo, March 2017) and to avoid their marginalization in society. Ennahdha considered dialogue to be the only way to correct the Salafis’ strict, narrow religious interpretations (Greenberg 2015). Ennahdha also believed that the marginalization of Salafism would represent a national security threat and that the conciliatory and pragmatic path Ennahdha followed during its political integration in the 1990s and 2000s was the best way forward. Ennahdha was more committed to building democratic institutions than maintaining its links with the Salafis, as Ennahdha had abandoned its radical Islamist agenda in the 1990s (Allani 2009; Cavatorta and Merone 2013) and had made it clear after the fall of Ben Ali that it would honor the agreement made with other opposition parties in October 2005 to participate in the construction of a liberal-democratic order in partnership with secular and nationalist movements equally opposed to Ben Ali’s rule.

Three reasons stand out for rejecting the idea that there was a united Islamic front of Ennahdha and the Salafis in opposition to the secularists. First, the preservation of Ennahdha’s organization was paramount for the vast majority of decision-makers within the party and a successful transition to democracy was the only way to guarantee it, particularly after the Egyptian military coup. Netterstrøm’s (2015) investigation of how the party’s leadership went about

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convincing ordinary members and activists of the necessity to drop the issue of sharia in the new constitution makes this clear. Second, ideological change had taken place within the party over time. It had become more moderate for years, and securing a smooth transition away from the Ben Ali regime had been a priority. The relative strength of the Salafis could be employed to put pressure on other parties during the negotiations over the text of the new constitution, but a successful transition to democracy with the party as one of its central actors was more of a priority than adhering to the radical Salafi agenda. Ennahdha's priorities and interest in governing can be seen in its participation in a grand coalition with the secular Nidaa Tounes party following the 2014 elections, despite the potential costs to Ennahdha. Third, Ennahdha represented a social class that had very little interest in radical and revolutionary change when it came to socio-economic issues (Merone 2014). This social class wanted to be integrated into the state and "share" in the project of national construction from which they had been excluded since Tunisia's independence from France in the 1950s. Like its political representative, Ennahdha, this middle-class social bloc had no interest in subverting the socio-economic order.

With time, it became clear that whatever links the Salafis had with Ennahdha would be severed once the latter announced its intention to refuse the insertion of sharia in the constitution draft, and that violent episodes attributed to Salafis would increase. In this complex situation, many within Ennahdha maintained a pragmatic approach, a moderate discourse, and a long-term vision (Personal interview with member of Ennahdha, March 2017) when it came to the Salafis. Some within the party had argued for Ennahdha to walk back from its position on sharia, and to instead push for its addition to the constitution because it could represent a potential political gain in the 2014 elections (Personal interview with former constituent Ennahdha MP, March 2017). However, the "costs" were deemed too high, i.e., a polarized society around pro- and anti-sharia contingents

(Guazzone 2013), including "the leftists, the Marxists, and the very secular elites" (Personal interviews with sitting Ennahdha MPs, March 2017). Such a move would also create a "red line" that its political partners, the Congrès pour la République (CPR)—a center-left secular political party—and Ettakatol, a social democratic political party, could not cross. Thus, the party's *shura*, or consulting council, issued a statement on March 26, 2012, confirming its commitment to preserve Article 1 of Tunisia's 1959 constitution as it stood. The article states that Islam is Tunisia's religion, but it does not mention that its precepts should be employed as a source of legislation.

For their part, the Salafis saw the refusal to insert sharia in the constitution as "giving nothing to them" (Personal interview with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017). This development, as anticipated, represented the breaking point in the relationship between the Salafis and Ennahdha. Indeed, it led to profound disappointment and frustration among Salafis toward Ennahdha because many considered the party to belong to a common Islamist front for the Islamization of state and society (Personal interview with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017). In addition, there existed a certain level of misunderstanding on the part of political actors and commentators as to what Salafis wanted and stood for. This was because the Salafis' ideological boundaries had not been clearly identified and Salafis themselves, for several reasons, had difficulty expressing—beyond easy sloganeering—what they wanted.

First, the complexity of the Salafi political landscape was underestimated in political circles in Tunisia and abroad. While some Salafis—the so-called *politicos*—disagreed with Ennahdha on the issue of sharia, they did not break entirely with institutional politics. Instead, they promoted their radical policy positions (such as the creation of a morality police) in the free market of ideas created during electoral campaigns, although they failed to elect a single representative.

Second, Ansar al-Sharia represented a social bloc that did not seek inclusion in the state. Instead, it called for the

dismantlement of the liberal-democratic institutional system being created because the group had never benefited from it, and would not do so if a compromise on the concept of *tunisianité* were to be reached through liberal-democratic institutions. A “continuation of the revolution through Salafism” found support in areas of the country that had always been marginalized and deprived of socio-economic opportunities (Lamloum and Ben Zina 2016).

In many ways, the relationship between the Salafis, in particular those linked to Ansar al-Sharia, and Ennahdha was doomed from the start. The vitriol following the ban on Ansar al-Sharia is testimony to that. Salafis began issuing several virulent critiques toward Ennahdha and its deputies when it became apparent in mid-2013 that Ansar al-Sharia’s legal status would be withdrawn and that Ennahdha would drop them in favor of consolidating its ties with Tunisian political actors committed to the new liberal-democratic order (Personal interview with current Ennahdha MP, March 2017). The Salafis’ scathing critiques recounted the numerous concessions Ennahdha had made to save the *troika* government⁵ and former members of Ben Ali’s party. Such compromises collided with the Islamist mission, according to Salafis. Salafis also accused Ennahdha of being a puppet of the West and Israel (Personal interview with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017), focusing on its own interests as a “normal” political entity rather than on promoting Islamic values in politics (Boukhars 2017). Accompanying this criticism were public denunciations of Ennahdha members by Salafis—an attempt to delegitimize the religious credentials of Ennahdha’s ideology and suggest that the party’s progressive principles contradicted the values of Islam (Personal interview with current Ennahdha MP, March 2017). Finally, Ennahdha’s deputies were labeled atheists, traitors, and *kuffar* (nonbelievers) (Personal interviews with current Ennahdha MPs, March 2017). At the same time, Ennahdha escalated its anti-Salafi discourse to distance itself from Salafis, stating the latter were “intruders in Islam” and “extreme among extreme individuals” (Personal interview with current

Ennahdha MP, March 2017). Notwithstanding the criticism leveled against it, Ennahdha advocated for democracy and women’s rights, notably by campaigning for a Code of Personal Status that would establish equality between men and women in many areas, and against polygamy (Personal interview with current Ennahdha MP, March 2017).

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the expectations of those who observe Tunisian politics, the relationship between Ennahdha and the Salafis was destined for failure. Religious and doctrinal differences between the two were not only profound, but they also masked a class conflict of sort. While Ennahdha finds support among the pious bourgeoisie, Salafis are strong in disenfranchised working class areas where citizens are much more interested in material gains and the subversion of the social order, as promised by the revolution. The radicalism of Salafism was marginalized in favor of a pragmatic approach to political change in the post-Ben Ali era—but the success of the liberal-democratic institutions that Ennahdha played a significant part in creating has not led to improvements in Tunisia’s socio-economic conditions. This failure threatens to undermine the consolidation of democracy and suggests that while Salafism might have disappeared from the public scene, many of the reasons why a large number of young people looked to it for revolutionary purity and inspiration have not. For the moment, Salafi revolutionary radicalism is manifested in isolated acts of political violence, but armed jihadism is unlikely to topple Tunisia’s democratic institutions. Of much greater concern is the widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of socio-economic progress, particularly among young people. Salafism offers different paths of mobilization, and a radical political agenda could re-emerge in the face of Tunisia’s current social and economic difficulties. In light of this, both domestic and international actors interested in the stability of the Tunisian regime should not take the defeat of Salafism for granted.

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ENDNOTES

1. Salafism is an ultraconservative and literalist interpretation of Islam.
2. Ennahdha is the main Tunisian Islamist party. It has now become the party of Muslim democrats and has officially separated its religious and political activities.
3. Amnesty legislation came into effect in February 2011 and allowed for the release of all political prisoners incarcerated during the Ben Ali regime.
4. Jabhat Al-Islah is a Salafi party that opted to participate in democratic institutional politics.
5. The first post-Ben Ali elected government was a coalition of three parties—Ennahdha, Ettakatol, and CPR—commonly referred to as the *troika*.

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