Who Speaks for Islam in Tunisia?

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In 2017, Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi proposed to grant women equal inheritance rights, challenging the traditional interpretation of the Qur’an, which grants women half the inheritance as men. Some religious authorities, such as the Tunisian Grand Mufti, supported the proposal, arguing it would “consolidate the place of women and eliminate discrimination between the two sexes.” However, other religious actors, including the Islamist political party Ennahdha, condemned the proposed reform as contradicting Islamic precepts.

During such disagreements, whom do Tunisians trust to provide the proper interpretation of religious texts? In other words, who wields religious authority in Tunisia?

To help answer this question, the Baker Institute conducted a poll of 800 Tunisians as part of a larger study on religious authority in the Middle East. The survey, described in detail in a previous country report (https://bit.ly/2HwekOX), yielded three surprising findings. First, while the moderate Islamist party Ennahdha performs well in elections, it is not widely viewed as an authority on religious matters. Second, traditional religious authorities, like the Grand Mufti and Grand Imam of Zaytouna mosque, enjoy substantial popularity despite their lack of independence from the state. Finally, the Islamic State (IS) continues to wield considerable religious authority in Tunisia, even while domestic Salafi–jihadi groups like Ansar al-Sharia do not. This policy brief discusses each of these findings in more detail, and reflects on their policy implications.

ENNAHDHA

Electorally, Ennahdha is one of the most powerful political parties in Tunisia. It won the 2011 constituent assembly elections, placed second in the 2014 parliamentary elections, and received the most votes of any party in the 2018 municipal elections. Although it once championed political Islam, Ennahdha in 2016 declared itself a Muslim Democratic party that would focus only on politics and not on religious activities.

Our survey likewise suggests that Tunisians do not view Ennahdha as a religious authority today. While Ennahdha’s president, Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, received one of the highest approval ratings among religious leaders named in the survey, he received relatively low scores when evaluated specifically “as a religious authority” (1.8 points out of 5). Moreover, in our endorsement experiments, which indirectly measured support for each religious figure, Ghannouchi saw a statistically significant negative effect: support for a religious interpretation decreased when endorsed by Ghannouchi.

These results suggest that Ennahdha is not viewed as a religious authority. Its repeated compromises on issues of religion, such as its decision not to enshrine shari’a in the 2014 constitution, may have weakened its religious credentials. Indeed, survey data from the Arab Barometer suggest that Ennahdha’s loss of support has been sharpest among Tunisians who wish to see shari’a as the basis of legislation.4

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Since our December 2017 survey, Ennahdha has taken a stronger stance on religious issues. It has repeatedly and publicly opposed Essebsi’s proposal for equal inheritance explicitly as a violation of the Quran and Sunna.\(^5\) This renewed deployment of religious rhetoric, and as of yet no willingness to compromise on this issue, may help it regain its religious base. However, it remains to be seen whether such attempts are “too little too late” or can actually shore up its image as a religious authority.

At the time of our survey, Tunisians looking for religious authority no longer found it in Ennahdha. This weakening of the “moderate middle” of the religious spectrum may help to explain our two other surprising findings: support for each end of the spectrum.

**STATE AUTHORITIES**

Among the most popular religious authorities in our survey were the Tunisian Grand Mufti, Othman Battikh, and the former Grand Imam of Zaytouna mosque, Hussein al-Obeidi. Both institutions represent Tunisia’s modern, liberal, and largely state-imposed interpretation of Islam. While most accounts would view these institutions as coopted by the state and therefore not credible authorities on Islam, our data suggest otherwise.

Among the seven Tunisian religious figures named in the survey, the Grand Mufti and Grand Imam of Zaytouna were the two most trusted as religious authorities. Moreover, they produced some of the few positive and statistically significant endorsement effects: support for a religious interpretation increased when endorsed by these state authorities—on some interpretations, by as much as a full point on the 1–5 point scale.

The strong performance of the state religious authorities is somewhat surprising. Grand Mufti Battikh, for instance, is visibly subservient to the state: he had opposed equal inheritance in 2016, only to then support it when proposed by Essebsi in 2017. The conventional wisdom would suggest that a lack of autonomy from the state should undermine their credibility as religious authorities, but our data suggest not. Similarly, in my experience, very few Tunisians actually know Battikh and Obeidi’s names, but the importance of their institutions should apparently not be underestimated.

The popularity of Tunisia’s state authorities has important policy implications. It would suggest that the Grand Mufti’s public support of equal inheritance in 2017 should not be simply dismissed. While justifying equal inheritance on religious grounds is particularly difficult,\(^6\) the survey results suggest that an endorsement by the Grand Mufti may be able to move the needle at least a few percentage points. Unfortunately, the Grand Mufti’s subsequent flip-flop on this issue, publicly opposing equal inheritance again once the bill was finally sent to the parliament in November 2018,\(^7\) may doom this proposal at least in its current form.

**SALAFI-JIHADISTS**

An equally surprising but more troubling survey finding concerns Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State (IS). While in direct questions, few were willing to state their support for Baghdadi, he emerges as the most popular figure in the endorsement experiments. An endorsement by Baghdadi increased support for a religious interpretation by about half a point on the 5-point scale on average, double that of the state authorities, and close to a full point on some questions. Baghdadi elicited a positive and statistically significant endorsement effect on 7 of the 14 religious interpretations, twice as many as any other figure.

Baghdadi’s popularity among Tunisians may help to explain why Tunisia has sent the highest per capita number of foreign fighters to the Islamic State. About 2,900 Tunisians fought in Iraq and Syria, while an additional 27,000 allegedly attempted the trek but were stopped by Tunisian authorities.\(^8\) Yet these numbers alone do not tell us why Tunisia has exported so many foreign fighters. Is it because Tunisians genuinely
support IS more than other populations, or is it simply because it is easier for Tunisians to leave their country than it is elsewhere? The survey results validate the assumption that Tunisia’s high rate of fighters implies a high rate of support for IS, rather than an easier ability to travel. And yet, while support for Baghdadi may have been expected given the number of foreign fighters, the extent of his support in Tunisia—far above any other religious figure named in the survey—is surprising and normatively troubling.

This support for Baghdadi may also be influencing some Tunisians’ relative openness to returning foreign fighters. According to the 2018 Afrobarometer survey, 30 percent of Tunisians would prefer returnees to be rehabilitated (27) or left alone (3), allowing their reintegration into society. For a sizable minority of Tunisians, fighting for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria does not warrant punishment or even a trial. On the other hand, while some Tunisians appear to support jihad abroad, they do not support it in their own backyard. Two Salafi-jihadi figures operating in Tunisia—Salafi sheikh Khatib al-Idrissi and Ansar al-Sharia leader Abu Iyadh—saw the lowest levels of support of any religious figure. Indeed, they saw strong negative endorsement effects, decreasing support for a statement by 0.2–0.5 points (out of 5) when their names were associated with it. Whether in the direct or indirect questions, these Tunisian Salafi-jihadi figures performed the worst of all 13 religious figures named in the survey. In short, while Tunisia may send thousands of fighters abroad, there appears to be very little support for violent or extremist figures back home.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The answer to the question of who speaks for Islam in Tunisia is fairly surprising. While Ennahdha may dominate the political scene, matters of religion appear to be swayed more by state religious authorities and, more troublingly, by the Islamic State. Indeed, it is possible that Ennahdha’s declining religious authority may have contributed to support for both of these extremes. As the center of the religious spectrum became delegitimized, Tunisians may have found religious authority instead in both the liberal and conservative ends. This polarization of religious authority may also help to explain the paradox that is Tunisia: how a country that produced thousands of jihadists can at the same time lead the Arab world on women’s rights.

These survey results have several implications for policymakers. They suggest that the Grand Mufti may carry the credibility to sway public opinion on religious matters, at least to a certain degree. The mufti could therefore be an important political player not only for equal inheritance but perhaps also for other priorities of the Tunisian state, such as countering violent extremism (CVE). Training state imams to advance counter narratives, for instance, may therefore be an effective approach. It is unclear, however, whether playing a more overt role in CVE would make state authorities be seen as (even) more political than they already are, and whether that would affect their credibility.

The relatively high support for the Islamic State, however, suggests that Tunisia still has much work to do to counter and prevent violent extremism. Tunisia and its international partners should continue to invest in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs to help stem this ideology, and promote alternative narratives to channel grievances into more peaceful pathways. Moreover, as foreign fighters return to Tunisia, the state should prioritize de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs to help prevent a potential future flow of fighters.

**ENDNOTES**

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7. See https://goo.gl/7dEJDC. In January 2019, however, Battikh claimed that he was continuing to study the matter. See also https://www.realites.com.tn/2019/01/egalite-successorale-le-dialogue-doit-se-poursuivre-selon-othmane-battikh/.

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